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AUTHORS NOTE / BACKGROUND

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THE DARK MATTER
BOOK ONE | Stained Trails

This is the first book in a (n/a) part series. Follow the protagonists Cloudkit, Oatkit, and Galetooth as they uncover darknesses the Clans have hidden from them... and a group of cats known as the Dark Matter.

This book is based very loosely on one I had written when I first started writing on Wattpad called The Dark Matter. It was about Badgerpaw and Stormpaw dealing with an antagonistic rogue group by this name. With no drafts left of it, I set off with a plan to rewrite it in a better - and perhaps more cruel - fashion.

This book will contain lgbtq+ characters and topics of strong religion and more.

If you spot any errors, feel free to correct but keep it to a minimal <3 I write fast but do go back and edit and revise over time.

Chapters average 2500+ words. This book is in a series and events will take a lot of build-up to transpire, so most of this book will be character development, plot building, and more... but I promise good moments as chapters will get longer and more in depths as we go along :)

cover done by the lovely Iovlonely

Content Warnings for...
- graphic gore
- violence
- cult / sacrifice depictions
- more to be added as written

Next book in the series.... Book Two | (undecided name)

CLAN BACKGROUND

COPPICECLAN lives in the dense woods. Their camp is located in a chasm amidst the deepest parts of it. Their territory has minor streams and ponds. They are strong and well-built to travel the rough terrain and undergrowth. It is said their chasm is too much for a kit to get out of - too rocky and steep - so their first accomplishment as an apprentice will be the ability to scale out of camp.

camp reference

VALECLAN lives in the valleys with mountains at the far edge of their territory. Their camp is able to a small waterfall and its stream, shallow and slow enough for them to even stand in. The edges of the valley around the river deem tall and sturdy enough for them to form their dens in the rocks and own built burrows.

camp reference

STARLINKED are the only roles different from your average warriors novel / fanfiction. Starlinked are healers with a foretold special connection to ancestors. There is typically two to three adult Starlinked at a time with any training. Starlinked are decided at birth, as every kit is blessed by a Starlinked which can lead to them telling the kits special connection with their ancestors and destiny to become one of them. They are known to keep the peace between both Clans as they have their own meetings outside of occasional gatherings more frequently.

And with that, the rest of the Clans history awaits you ahead.... enjoy :)

ALLIEGANCES

COPPICECLAN

LEADER
Talonstar - muscular brown tabby tom with dark amber eyes.

DEPUTY
Berrytuft - fluffy calico she-cat with brown eyes.

STARLINKED
Gorsefeather - gray and white mottled she-cat with misty gray-blue eyes.

Crowbite - pure black tom with yellow eyes.
Apprentice : Mousepaw

WARRIORS
Flamedance - ginger tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes.

Shadedapple - black and white tom with sharp yellow eyes.

Willowmist - dark gray tabby she-cat with a white chest and paws and browns eyes.

Webtail - white tom with a fluffy tail and amber eyes.
Apprentice : Flickerpaw

Doebounce - pale brown she-cat with white freckles and paws.
Apprentice : Mudpaw

Riverfrost - pale gray-blue tom with grayish eyes.

Nightfang - black tom one set of white toes and yellow eyes.

Honeyshine - sandy colored tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Sandnettle - sandy colored tabby tom with white paws, chest, and underbelly.

Viperleap - brown tabby she-cat with black toes and ear tips.

Stormyheart - white tom with gray tabby patches and blue eyes.

Patchsight - black, orange, and white tortoiseshell she-cat half-blind in one eye.

Hawkstorm - dark silver she-cat with one white paw and green eyes.

Rockfoot - pale brown tom with black toes and freckles.

APPRENTICES
Mousepaw - small white she-cat with black toes and yellow eyes.

Flickerpaw - orange tabby tom with a white chest, toes, and underbelly.

Mudpaw - dark brown tabby tom with white paws and green eyes.

QUEENS
Daisyspring - creamy gray she-cat with white freckles and paws. (nursing Cloudkit and Oatkit)

Minnowshine - silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. (expecting Sandnettle's kits)

ELDERS
Fernstep - fluffy gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

VALECLAN

LEADER
Rainstar - dark silver tabby she-cat with gray-blue eyes.

DEPUTY

Swiftwind - agile black and white tom with yellow eyes

STARLINKED
Sparrowbreeze - brown tabby she-cat with darker freckles and amber eyes.

Rustpetal - calico she-cat with copper eyes.

Watermoss - light gray tabby tom with a white undershine and blue eyes.

WARRIORS
Galetooth - lean brown and white mottled tom with brown eyes.

Sunsong - pale sand-colored she-cat with amber eyes.
Apprentice : Snowpaw

Frostspider - tall white tom with blue eyes.

Hollynose - gray and black mackerel she-cat with green eyes.
Apprentice : Lightpaw

Darkcloud - pure black tom with hazel eyes.

Emberberry - ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, underbelly, paws, and tail-tip.

Mistyecho - silver and white patched tom with yellow eyes.

Juniperpool - black she-cat with green eyes.

Spottedwish - brown and black spotted tabby tom with brown eyes.

Mottledwhisker - brown and black spotted tabby tom with amber eyes.

Batsight - pale dark gray she-cat with sharp yellow eyes.

Haresnap - lean and pale russet brown tom with green eyes.

Branchbelly - russet brown tom with a white underbelly and chest.

Mapleblaze - orange and black spotted tortoiseshell with white

freckles and paws.

APPRENTICES
Lightpaw - orange tabby she-cat with white chest, paws, and underbelly.

Snowpaw - white she-cat with brown eyes.

QUEENS
Leafshadow - gray, orange, and black tortoiseshell she-cat (nursing Swiftwind's kits: Morningkit, Ripplekit, and Applekit)

ELDERS
Fireflower - pale orange she-cat with green eyes.

Hollowshade - dark gray tabby tom with an odd limp and amber eyes.

PROLOGUE

A FULL MOON LIT UP THE SKY AS IF IT WERE BARELY DUSK, stars aiding its brightening performance. It shone over the mountains like a crown atop their heads, leaving the high structures to stretch shadows over the valleys. It was a brilliant scene to the singing crickets and other creatures of the night that basked in its awakening, even though some flowers bowed sorrowfully at the loss of the sun. A cool breeze followed it, whisking over the moors and flitting with the tall grass. It was a night bound to full of promises - or perhaps even dread.

Approaching the mountains in the path of the full moon was four cats. Two looked likewise in appearance, mottled black and white in a similar pattern with differing eyes. One of the others was larger in comparison, muscles rippling under his dark gray coat and amber eyes luminous in the moonlight. The last one was the smallest and youngest of the bunch, her brown tabby pelt fluffed out against the breeze. They traveled with one of the black and white cats in the load, a focused stare directing him towards the range of the mountains and his sister not too far behind. The other two followed in their trail with a more ambling, confused glance to their surroundings as if they were looking for something noted to them before.

"Ibistide, are you sure this is where you saw him?" The larger tom questioned, his tail lashing in uncertainty.

Ibistide peered over his shoulder and nodded back to the tom. "Shrikefoot and I spotted him right here in the basin at the bottom of these mountains. I'm sure he's been taking shelter here."

The other tom's muzzle scrunched up and his faces twisted doubtfully. Loners weren't known to be on their territory, especially in the depths of it by the mountains. When Shrikefoot and Ibistide came to him for assistance he was hesitant, but then Ibistide's apprentice, Sparrowpaw, insisted that it was of importance if Ibistide said so. He trusted the Starlinked tom and his apprentice

surely, but being so close to the stretch of the mountains at the height of the full moon had an ominous feel to the paranoid tom.

They approached the edge of the basin - a deep dip in the earth at the bottom of the mountains with a stream pooled in the middle of it. The little pool reflected the gleam of the moonlight, those of the stars captured as well and lining the pool perfectly in its form. It was a small, rather open basin, a quick scan of his gaze enough to cover it. There were no pawprints tracked into the edges or no bones scattered about to show any sign of another cat taking shelter in the basin. It was inhabitant unless it had been for a minor second, but even then he could pick up no scents there but their own as the wind fell back on them from the mountains. Ibistide and Shrikefoot must've seen a ghost. It wasn't be past them as since the loss of their brother they both had been indifferent and desolate through the sorrows of it, but there was also the chance that the ancestors were attempting to show Ibistide something as well. He was a Starlinked after all.

"And what did this loner look like?" He asked the siblings, glancing sideways back at the two as he stood at the edge of the basin.

"He was pretty big and tough-looking. Seeing him probably would've reminded you of yourself, Hollowshade," Shrikefoot answered with a snicker.

Hollowshade passed her an unamused stare then looked to Ibistide instead. "What did he look like?" He repeated in a more serious, husk tone.

"Shrikefoot wasn't entirely wrong. He was large and brown, just like you," Ibistide meowed. The tom then stepped to Hollowshade's side, both of their gazes dropping back down to the bottom of the basin. The radiant, starlit pool was almost blinding, and Hollowshade could've sworn the basin echoed Ibistide's words back at him - ringing and clamorous. "Yet he lay at the bottom of the basin in shambles... *just like you.*"

A panicked yowl erupted from the tom as Shrikefoot shoved into him, sending him tumbling down into the basin. Though the fall wasn't significant it was rocky and steep. He twisted in the air

attempting to catch himself but instead he landed terribly wrong on one of his rear legs, pain searing through his leg and numbing the rest of his body as if he had laid out in blankets of snow and frost. He landed with a *thud* and ripple of shock froze him on the ground for a moment, his body now half-submersed in the pool of water in the basin. The water lapped at his fur and crawled into his panic-parted jaws for a moment until the tom snapped back into reality, groaning and swiveling his head weakly to gaze back up at the others.

The hopeful part of him was seeking the idea that it may have been an accident, but the scene at the top of the basin proved no difference from the actual occurrence. Shrikefoot now had Sparrowpaw pinned down tight under her grasp, the apprentice squirming and calling out desperately to Hollowshade. Ibistide was scaling down the side of the basin, his unsheathed claws leaving a trail in the terrain. He reached the bottom and stalked towards Hollowshade, an ominous glow in his eyes as the star-lit pool the warrior laid helplessly in reflected through it. Nothing about his look was as starlinked as his destiny foretold though - it was dark and profound. It was murderous.

"What are you doing!?" Hollowshade croaked, managing to pull himself back to his paws. His rear leg pulsated with pain though, twitching aimlessly with any attempt to put a balance to it. It was as if he could barely control his own limb. He was now stuck hobbling on three legs in the depths of a basin with Ibisfoot lurking forward with the intent to harm him further.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to *kill* you," Ibistide answered in a low, drawn-out tone.

Hollowshade's eyes widened. His claws buried into the gravelly sand at the bottom of the pool. Never in moons would he foretell Ibistide to be murderous, and with the tom lay no motivation to take the path even with the grieving of his brother. Shrikefoot and Ibistide's brother had died due to a burdening illness that was no cats' fault. Why would they want to kill Hollowshade?

"Hollowshade!"

As if on cue with Sparrowpaw's plea, Ibistide had lunged right for Hollowshade. The tom was quick to react, emerging his paw with a paw-full of the brisk sand from the bottom of the fool. In a swiping motion, he tossed the sand right towards Ibistide's face. The silt settled into his eyes, earning a yowl from the tom as he thrashed his paws frantically over his muzzle and eyes. Hollowshade then reared himself forward with the able strength of his one, working hind leg, barreled into the Starlinked's chest. They tumbled for a minute until Hollowshade found his own weight over Ibistide's, pinning the black and white tom on the bank of the pool.

"You're a fool if you think you can get away with this so easily," Hollowshade snarled.

Ibistide blinked up at him, his eyes stained red as he still struggled to rid of the sand in them. "Why do you think I brought help, limp-brain?" He still antagonized back confidently.

Suddenly, Hollowshade felt his breath be knocked from him as Shrikefoot slammed into him. The she-cat followed his stumbling movement quickly, lashing out a paw to slash his flank. The wound stung and made the warrior wince, almost falling back on his injured rear leg as he stepped back from another swipe of her paw. Shrikefoot then pounced, using his slowness to her advantage and sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

Hollowshade roared out and used both paws to heave the feline off of him, fur being ripped clean off his shoulder as she was pried away. While she teetered to the side spitting his fur out of her mouth, the tom pounced back into action. He grappled his paws around her to use her weight to hold his own due to his injury, his claws holding into her skin as he parted his jaws over the back of her neck. Ibistide was alert to his sister's struggle though, the tom having struck forward and now biting brutally into Hollowshade's already harmed leg. The senior warrior howled out in pain, struggling to kick the tom off of him and being forced to loosen his grip on Shrikefoot as he focused his strength on now freeing himself.

Shrikefoot wriggled away, the she-cat cursing under her breath as her sides were streaked with blood and silt. Hollowshade kicked

Ibistide off of him, veering around to follow it up with a heavy slash to the Starlinked's face. The right side of his face over his eye was left with a deep laceration, blood dripping into and blurring the tom's vision. As he was steering backwards, Shrikefoot pounced into the air and rocketed towards Hollowshade, paws outstretched and teeth showing.

Hollowshade ducked then threw up his weight, his head slamming the molly in her exposed stomach. She was sent flying aimlessly towards the walls of the basin, paws flailing to try and find a landing.

She shrieked but then it ended suddenly, cut off with a audible, sickening *thud.* Hollowshade and Ibistide were quick to scan their gazes over to her, their eyes then wide with horror. Shrikefoot had been sent flying right into a wall of jagged stones and hard clay, one of the stones left with a streak of crimson that led to her limp body at the bottom of it. Her head was smeared with blood, eyes rolled into the back of her head and her neck twisted in an uncomfortable fashion. The sight made Hollowshade's stomach churn with disgust, bile burning in his throat as a panicking Ibistide pelted over to his sister's side.

"Shrikefoot! Shrikefoot!" He cried out, using his paws to nudge at the fallen warrior.

There was no response and her corpse lay unmoving.

Hollowshade's ears pinned to the back of his head but he kept his distance from the grieving tom and Shrikefoot's body. His adrenaline went flat and his claws sheathed, horror written over the tom's face as he heaved with every breath. He was so lost in the fight to protect himself that he didn't even consider the idea of killing his attackers but now Shrikefoot lay limp on the other side of his basin all to his doing.

Sparrowpaw finally skid down the basin and to Hollowshade's side, looking the tom over frantically. "Hollowshade! Are you okay? I'm sorry I didn't come to help I-"

"Don't be," Hollowshade murmured, his gaze still plastered ahead.

The star-lit pool of the basin seemed to glow a little dimmer between them all as the moon began to sank below the peaks of the mountain. Darker shadows loomed over Ibistide, who now turned from Shrikefoot's body to eye the others. His expression was gnarled in profound anger and despair, blood still dripping off his face and landing on the bank of the basin pool.

Hollowshade felt a sting of pity despite Ibistide's intentions. "We don't have to fight," Hollowshade told him, Sparrowpaw pressing closer to his side.

"You killed her!" Ibistide exclaimed through the hiss of his clenched teeth.

Hollowshade winced at his accusation. "I didn't mean to. I just wanted to-"

"This isn't over, Hollowshade. Sleep with one eye open and the other stuck in your nightmares of this moment. I'll be back... and so will my sisters," Ibistide spat icily.

Hollowshade and Sparrowpaw only watched in dismay as Ibistide grabbed his limp sister by her scruff, struggling to haul her up the sides of the basin. The warrior should've pursued him in that moment as in all truthfulness, Shrikefoot's death and the entire situation was *Ibistide's fault.* Hollowshade only observed though as he finally managed to lift her body over the edge and disappeared into the distance, a trail of crimson marking his stuttered path.

"Why did they want to kill us?" Sparrowpaw quickly asked as if she had been holding the question in for moons.

Hollowshade's gaze was still glued to the trail of blood Ibistide had left in his departure. There was a mortifying, grueling feeling twisting in his stomach that almost overwhelmed the pain of his wounds and broken rear leg. He swallowed his fear and brushed his tail over Sparrowpaw's shoulder in attempts to comfort her.

"I don't know... but let's go back home. I need to speak to Violetstar about this."

When they left the scene, Hollowshade took one last glance back at the basin. The tom refused to visit the basin for the rest of his life and remained stuck with the limp he was granted that day, his leg forever paralyzed in its awkward twist. He lived every day in fear of Ibistide's return and the tom's last words stirring uncomfortably in his head, but he never came back even till the day Hollowshade finally retired his role as a warrior.

Ibistide journeyed far. So far the stars lost their link to him and only shadows lingered in his dreams. He buried his sister and found a new home far from his old. He found and aligned with new friends and kin, but never did the loss of his sisters stray from haunting him.

So, he learned to kill. To spill blood and even to eventually not even flinch at another's last breath.

And he learned to *revive.* To sacrifice and turn another's last breath into one's new one.

chapter one

WHEN GALETOOTH WAS MERELY GALEPAW, he had attended his first gathering barely a moon after his apprenticeship. His brother, Frostpaw, was more exhilarated with the event than he was, barely able to keep his paws from bouncing off the ground the entire travel there. Rainpaw and her siblings, Hollypaw and Darkpaw, trailed along with them, all of their mentors ahead following Violetstar's lead. The apprentice's were the loudest among the group as they journeyed to the spot for the gathering at the border between ValeClan and CoppiceClan, igniting an irritating clamor.

"I bet CoppiceClan apprentice's smell like nothing but sap and mud," Frostpaw exclaimed, exaggerating a scrunch of his muzzle to show his disgust.

Darkpaw chortled and playfully nudged Frostpaw. "The crazy part is... they actually do! All they have to tell stories about to is how they climbed out of their camp for the first time! I bet I could do that with my eyes closed!"

"Yeah right, you can't even smell with your eyes closed. Even that's a challenge for you," Hollypaw scoffed at her brother.

"Isn't their camp *actually* difficult to climb out of for younger ones?" Galepaw noted, ears twitching. He could admit it was *barely* a question as his mentor, Palesnow, had recounted to him a time she had been in the camp herself.

All the other apprentice's turned to him with a scowl, though Frostpaw's was more embarrassed with his brother's interjection and Rainpaw's was more light-hearted. Darkpaw chortled at Galepaw's comment, earning an indignant look from the younger tom.

"Isn't it *actually* difficult for you to have a little more fun?"

"Quiet! You young ones are too loud. We're nearly there," the older deputy, Bearbelly, snapped at the apprentices.

Galepaw reduced his pace to trail further behind the other apprentices, but Rainpaw was quick to follow him. The silver molly glanced him up and down with an empathetic smile. Ever since they were kits, Rainpaw was always at Galepaw's side. She always told stories about how she witnessed him be named - sometimes even falsifying some for fun on how she had been the one to name him. She and him grew to be relatively close friends despite her siblings constant teasing on the younger apprentice.

"Don't let them get to you, Galepaw. You know they are too comfortable in being annoying," Rainpaw huffed.

Galepaw cast her a little smile. "Thanks."

"We're here!"

Violetstar's call alerted Galepaw and Rainpaw to gaze back ahead. The gathering area was among a shallow stream that cut along the border. It was shallow enough for both clans to stand in as the conversed - and for apprentices like Darkpaw and Hollypaw to irritably splash around in. The perch for the leaders and their Starlinked was an old, wooden twoleg bridge that arched over the river. The leaders would stand on the rail of the bridge with the Starlinked and their deputy settled on the structure behind them as they shared announcements for their clans. The best part of the gathering though that Palesnow persisted for Galepaw to delve into was his ability to talk to and befriend CoppiceClan cats. CoppiceClan and ValeClan were rather serious about maintaining the peace long kept between their clans, and Galepaw befriending some of them was considered a step in the peace for their future.

CoppiceClan was already there, ValeClan cats quick to greet them at the river. Rainpaw beckoned to Galepaw as he was fighting off a knot of anxiety in his stomach. He took a sharp inhale and followed her to the river. Dipping his paws in the water, he felt a shiver roll down his spine at cold touch. He hadn't had his swimming lessons yet so the lap of the water at his fur was unfamiliar and a little unnerving to the tom. Rainpaw was comfortably right at his side though, the two of them joining the other apprentices who now settled in with a CoppiceClan group of apprentices.

The other group of apprentices contained four of them. There was a set of toms and a set of she-cats. The toms looked more vexed at their location, casting the excited ValeClan apprentice's a pointed look. The mollies appeared more excited, one of them catching Galepaw's attention in an instant. Her creamy fur was long and elegantly groomed, her gaze warm and welcoming. She introduced herself politely to the ValeClan apprentice's and the moment her eyes met Galepaw's, he froze and felt his heart pummel at his chest.

Stars, she's pretty, Galepaw thought awkwardly to himself. There was something about her that made his paws tingle and his fur feel frazzled and hot.

"New apprentices now, ay?" One of the CoppiceClan toms pointed out with a glance over Frostpaw and Galepaw.

"That's Frostpaw and his brother, Galepaw," Darkpaw explaining with a twitch of his tail. *Great, I get introduced as his brother. Way to make me sound insignificant.*

The other tom apprentice idly huffed while the molly that caught Galepaw's eyes cast him a sideways look. "Well, Talonpaw *especially* likes to hear new apprentices first training stories," she purred, Talonpaw shooting her daggers.

*"*Well, I successfully learned a pin in a heartbeat. Kestreljaw said in all his lifetime he's never seen an apprentice as worthy as me," Frostpaw boasted, Galepaw struggling not to roll his eyes at his taller brother.

"Yeah!" Hollypaw chirped in agreement as she added on to Frostpaw's bragging. "He even almost beat Darkpaw in his first practice fight!"

Darkpaw scoffed at his sister, embarrassed with her remark. Talonpaw and the other CoppiceClan tom grimaced at Frostpaw almost as if they were wondering if the younger apprentice would be good practice for their own skillsets. Then the cream colored molly that Galepaw still found himself staring at looked back to him with a grimace.

"And you, Galepaw?"

He flushed at her recognition of him, freezing under every cats' burning stares. When he finally parted his jaws to answer, Darkpaw abruptly cut him off with a snicker.

"Galepaw took what felt like *moons* to learn just how to hunt a mouse. He even came up with this silly thing one day where he rolled in mud to cover his scent. He walked out like a brand new, brown tabby! It covered his scent, but it also covered his eyes and his nose and he was stuck cleaning himself off instead of hunting!"

Galepaw felt his ear tips grow hot at Darkpaw's words as they fell against the back of his head. Admittedly, he still thought the mud was a good idea, just not *so* much of it. The other apprentice's aside from Rainpaw and the stunning molly were giggling at him though. Rainpaw hissed at her siblings teasing while the molly hushed her friends, turning to Galepaw and smiling.

"I think using mud to mask his scent was actually a really clever idea on Galepaw's part," she voiced, her benevolence earning an annoyed sneer from Talonpaw.

Galepaw had shut out the others though in that moment, all his attention toned in on the CoppiceClan she-cat. Not only was she alluring, but she was kind, and everything about her made Galepaw feel like there was nothing but clouds underneath his paws and flower petals brushing the inside of his stomach. He shook away his embarrassment and dipped his head politely to her. Then he realized that he hadn't caught her name, so he hurried to ask her.

"Erm... I didn't hear your name by the way. What was it again?"

With an endearing giggle, she told Galepaw her name and he stored it in a special part of his mind for safe-keeping. He wanted to remember her for the next gathering, and he would.

And he would remember her for all of his life.

-

At the wake of dusk, Galetooth was still sat outside at the banks of the camp river. Most cats were on a stride to their dens at this point, and even his former company of Frostspider and his daughter, Lightpaw, had already made their departure. ValeClan cats were known to rest early to be awake right at the first sliver of sunlight. They weren't necessarily cats in favor of being out in the dark as the bask of sunlight felt more comforting and at home in the valleys. Galetooth was comfortable in his desolation though, watching out of the corner of his eye as the last cats disappeared into their ridge side dens.

The tom was quick to stand as the final tail slithering into the darkness of their nests. With one last veer of his head around, he started towards the opposite end of camp. The end of camp packed with most of their dens was walled in by tall ridges and stones, but the other end of their camp was a stretch open into the wilderness. Their camp would be considered mouse-brained and too risky for a CoppiceClan cat, but their valleys weren't rumored with many appearances of large predators like the other clan.

A cat always stood guard at all time though at the more open end of camp and as Galetooth padded along, the sandy coat of Sunsong came into sight. She was swift to notice Galetooth's approach, her ears angled forward and posture sturdy and straight. She was a dedicated warrior, which explained her taking the position rather early. Usually the guards were amidst a switch at this time and Galetooth could leave undisturbed, but Sunsong was adamant about her job.

"Where are you trying to go?" Sunsong mewed, tilting her head at the tom.

"On a stroll," Galetooth answered curtly.

She stood for a moment as if prepared to stand in Galetooth's way. "On a stroll at dusk? *Alone?* That's not very safe. Why?"

"To clear my head." He was getting a little agitated with her

questioning. Usually his departures were easier than this and he left his responses brief to try and avoid further questioning.

"You must need to clear your head a lot then," Sunsong pointed out. "Is something bothering you?"

"No, I-"

"He won't be alone actually."

Both of their heads cocked to reveal Rainstar trotting up to them. The molly looked drowsy but passed them a faint smile, flicking her tail over Galetooth's shoulder. "I'll be going with him. We *both* need to clear our heads."

Galetooth wasn't satisfied with Rainstar's sudden company, but he didn't feel the need to argue it either. Rainstar knew his situation better than any cat. She had always been there for him through thick and thin. She obviously liked Galetooth - more than a friend that was - and he knew that, but his love abided elsewhere and his friendship to her was more important.

"Safe travels then," Sunsong simply ended, side-stepping to allow the two to pass.

Rainstar dipped her head to her warrior and Galetooth strolled out of camp at her side. It was quiet between the two of them as they lurked away from camp, leaving Sunsong peering after them in the distance. They started up the rolls of the valley with stars flickering above them as if they watched the twos every move. The air was mildly chilling as leaf-fall was right around the corner. The valleys grew cool and were brushed with a fine breeze at this time of season, fluffing out the ValeClan cat's coats in attempts at warmth. Luckily, leafbare afterwards didn't promise at least *much* snow for them, otherwise they'd be nothing but frozen carcasses.

Once they fell behind the hill and strolled into the valleys, Rainstar was quick to look over to Galetooth. "I think I owe you an apology."

Galetooth blinked, puzzled at her words. "For what?"

The silver molly sighed, eyes glossy as the glanced ahead back to

the valley. "You're visiting her grave again, aren't you?"

His heart sunk at her words and ears flattened. He wasn't a stranger to visiting her grave, but Rainstar recalling how repetitive his visits had been filled him with an overwhelming sadness. Ever since he lost her, there was an undisputed anger that ran through him, and he went two moons ignoring Rainstar and others. That rage slowly turned into a pitiful sorrow, the tom grieving in the shadows of the camp and behind fake smiles. He hated that no cat knew his pain but Rainstar, Swiftwind, and Frostspider, and they saw it in everything that he did.

Rainstar assumed his answer after a long, agonizing silence and began to speak once more. "I blame myself, really," she admitted, Galetooth glancing to her simultaneously. "I should've let her into ValeClan sooner. I should've let her in when you and Frostspider were too busy taking care of Lightpaw and Emberberry. I was too busy being worried about how the clan would feel about her and you to accept her in and..." her ears fell like the last leaves of leaf-fall - in an entrance to misery...,"now she's dead."

"It wasn't your fault," Galetooth snapped. His intervention was pointed, but he knew Rainstar could see his sincerity in the end. "No cat is to blame. I understood all your decisions in the end despite our arguing. I just..." he trailed off for a moment, a deep melancholy in his eyes. "I miss her every day, and the life and family we could've had together. Now, I get none of that. *Fate* is to blame for that. It bared its ugly teeth in the form of wolves when I wasn't around to protect her... and that is a different kind of pain than any I've felt before. If anything, *I am the one to blame."*

Rainstar shook her head in retaliation. "No! You did everything for her. You loved her. You gave her a life many cats have always dreamed of." She paused for a moment and stepped closer, granting him a friendly nudge to try and lighten the mood. "Remember when you would pick a different flower for her every time you would visit? It didn't matter how far you had to travel, you were dedicated to show her every type of flower that lived on ValeClan's land. I accompanied you once or twice and I saw how happy it made her."

"You have been a wondrous friend, Rainstar. Without you, I may

have never been able to see her again, and that's why it could never be your fault," Galetooth murmured, sharing a faint smile with the leader. "I'm sure she saw you as a friend too."

The leader shied away with a longing look. Galetooth knew it was hard for her as they grew up to watch him fall in love with another she-cat, but she still was always right at his side as a friend. Rainstar kept their relationship a secret from the moment she found out, complying her deputy to as well when she eventually became leader. She always aided him in sneaking out to see her and even spent some moments with them herself. She was the greatest friend Galetooth was blessed to grow up with.

But no cat could and never would be his mate, and he hoped Rainstar never attempted to ask him the question.

As they sauntered over the valley hills, the land eventually grew into a flatter stretch of grass and the grass eventually grew taller. A few trees were scattered about, towering pines with long shadows that made the forest appear bigger than it was. The ValeClan scent was faded and now strange, new ones flooded the air and stung at their noses. Right on the other side of their border was this small pine forest with an old, tattered wooden structure, one that reeked of old twoleg scents and dead mice. Flowers and shrubbery blossomed at its edges in overgrown fashion with vines crawling over the walls. The ceiling appeared unsafe and mildly creaked in the wind, but it was obvious that it had stood for moons intact and unharmed even in strong storms.

On the right side of the structure lay a beautiful patch of gypsophilias. The white, little petals of the flowers tilted to and fro in the breeze and its familiar scent hastened Galetooth's scent towards it. In the center of the display was a mound of dirt, small spots of grass now growing into it that shot a pang into Galetooth's heart.

It was her grave.

He sat before it suddenly as if he were bound to crumble at any moment to nothing but a pile of fur and rubble. What was once a pair of endearing, chocolate eyes was now nothing but a grave and

a memory. It had been this way for four moons now, but still every day her death tortured him with devastating pummels straight to his heart. He missed her more than the stars missed the embrace of night and more than wolves could miss the full moon. Galetooth found himself even teetering on the idea of death - if it were to outstretch its paws for him he would accept it, for all he wanted to do was see his love again.

With a heavy inhale, Rainstar settled in beside him, keeping a respectful distance. "I know it doesn't mean much Galetooth but... You picked a beautiful spot to bury her," she whispered warmheartedly.

"This was her temporary home after all, and these were her favorite flowers," Galetooth remarked. His shoulders and his expression dropped. "She always said if we were to have kits, she'd name one after them. That was... one of the last things she got to tell me before I was gone caring for my brother and Lightpaw. Before just a moon later... she was gone. The first time I came back to see her..."

"Have you asked the others?" Rainstar murmured.

He curtly shook his head, a bitter twist to his face at her question. "No. If any cat would be to blame for this, it would be them. They were the whole reason she had to live here anyway."

"Maybe you should speak to them at the gathering. It may help for clos-"

"I don't need closure, Rainstar," Galetooth spat sourly, earning a wince from the silver she-cat. He groaned and shut his eyes with a dip of his head. "I'm sorry but I am not a cat who can simply look ahead and move on. She meant every star in the sky to me. Do you know what that's like?"

He could feel Rainstar's gaze burning into the side of his face. She knew what that was like.

"No," she brisky meowed.

But yet she lied, as she always did for the sake of him, and he knew

all too well of it. Pity took its long claws to his heart and he opened his eyes, brushing his tail gently over Rainstar's.

"I don't mean to be cold. Losing her hasn't been easy, and Frostspider... well, you know him. I love my brother but he insists I move on. I don't work like that," Galetooth huffed.

"I know," Rainstar replied, peering back over to the grave. There was a deep, despondent fog in her eyes. "If only the revival stories were true."

Galetooth's attention snapped over to Rainstar wholly at her comment. "The what?"

"You haven't heard the tales of Ibistide's exile?" Rainstar questioned with a half-drop of one of her ears and a head tilt.

Galetooth pondered back to his days of youth when the stories of Ibistide were more fresh and well-told, but none spoke of 'revival'. He shrugged. "I've heard them, but never have I heard of any revival stories. What does that even mean?"

"Well, Ibistide's true intentions were mainly whispered between us leaders, deputies, and Starlinked, but I thought word of it would slip out the burrows by now," Rainstar began, shuffling her paws. "Ibistide before he was exiled believed in some strange practices, but one in particular was interesting after he loss his brother, Storkclaw. He rumored a way of reviving him to his former mentor, Vinestike, who instantly complained to Violetstar about his weird proposals. Vinestrike and Violetstar never shared the details of what Ibistide insisted would work, but when he tried to kill Hollowshade and Sparrowpaw, they knew all too well it had something to do with his ideals."

Galetooth could feel his heartbeat in his ears and one of his paws found itself closer to his mates grave as if he were reaching for hers. "Does it... work?"

"Not sure. When Ibistide fled, no cat ever saw him again, and his plan to kill Hollowshade and Sparrowpaw never fell through," Rainstar answered. "But I bet it was a bunch of dung. Ibistide was

clever and considered very close to our ancestors, but the idea of bringing back the dead is..." she trailed off as if she noticed Galetooth's interest in the story, her ears flattening as she started again. "Is bee-brained."

"I don't think so. Many cats didn't deserve to die, so if there's some *tale* of a chance to bring a loved one back, why not chase it?" Galetooth countered.

Rainstar shot him a more direct, hard stare - one of a leader defining her word as so. "Because chasing it apparently led to murder, and then that murder just becomes a cycle, doesn't it? The ancestors would be foolish to allow such a method, and any followers would be just as if not more foolish."

Galetooth knew she was attempting to interject his curiosity with the stories, so he nodded to show his agreement with her. "I suppose you are right."

But he didn't care if she were right, because now all he could look at when he glanced away from her was a grave. A grave that never should've existed.

"Let's go home, Galetooth. We both deserve our rest," Rainstar noted as she stood to her paws, beckoning him to follow. "Then in the morning, how about I tell Swiftwind to assign you on a hunting patrol with Lightpaw and Hollynose. I could give a rat's tail if you visit here and grieve, but at least try to live in the honor of her name a little more and catch up with your kin. It may help you feel a little better."

He dipped his head respectfully to her and stood to follow. He never strode back home though without a glance back to his love, and now it was as if he could *feel* her chocolate gaze wanting to look back at him.

I miss you, my love.

chapter two

FROM THE MOMENT OATKIT OPENED HIS EYES, he knew he wanted to be a warrior. It was a surging feeling as he grew to learn the ways of his clan and the stories that enhanced it. Every day went on with another memory, whether it was watching new apprentices return with their first prey or cats scramble to the clearing to be assigned to patrols. The way of the warrior was fascinating to him, but it was also expected heavily of him.

Daisyspring, his mom, told Oatkit and Cloudkit the moment they could hear that they were *special.* It wasn't the typical whisper of an endearing mother to her kit, but a whisper instead laced with dignity and graveness. Cats stared at them with wide eyes and the Starlinked visited them far too often, pestering on if they had seen ghosts in their dreams or when they would be made into apprentices. Supposedly from the moment they were born, Gorsefeather and Crowbite saw a significant greatness in them that promised a full, exuberant future for CoppiceClan even through the tales of hardship ahead. So every day even before their eyes opened and paws scraped the earth, they were watched over and admired like they were gods.

Talonstar and Daisyspring, their parents, took pride in it, but also the talk of it drove a small wedge in between them. Talonstar didn't visit them as much the older they grew, but Oatkit knew it was because his father couldn't wait to see them out hunting and battling instead. He was dedicated to make his father proud and watchful of those days when they arrived.

Still confined to the nursery though, Oatkit and Cloudkit grew bored at times. Sometimes Minnowshine told them stories from back when she was an apprentice and her story-telling never failed to be intriguing, but the she-cat had been absent all morning. Daisyspring was usually too tired to endorse their pleading for a narrative, or she just simply didn't care to tell another story to her kits. Now though, they were crawling over their mother to question

their older friend's disappearance.

"Mom, where's Minnowshine?" Cloudkit was first to ask, laid lazily over their mother's haunches. It wasn't unusual for Cloudkit to be stuck to their mother's side - even in a literal sense sometimes. "She's been gone since we woke! She's never usually awake that early."

Daisyspring stifled a laugh at her kits, drawing a more distant Oatkit closer with a brush of her tail. "Well, little ones, she's having her own kits to tell stories to now."

Oatkit lit up at his mother's words, Cloudkit letting out an excited shrill. "She's having her kits!?"

"Finally, those kits were making her stories shorter with all that kicking," Oatkit scoffed.

Daisyspring rolled her eyes, drawing her tongue over Oatkit's head. He raised a paw to swat his mother away, but she persisted on anyway. "Now, don't be so bitter. They're going to be your denmates for the next two moons before you become apprentices. By the time you're out the den, they'll be eyes open and paws ready to leave it themselves."

"If I don't get to become an apprentice early, neither do they!" Oatkit stammered, clearly not catching onto his mother's sarcasm. What could he say, he had a strong point, and he meant it with every word.

"Can we go see them? Please, please!" Cloudkit begged, rolling off of her mother and next to her brother.

Daisyspring shook her head. "Give her time, Cloudkit. She'll let us know when we can meet them." Their mother then stood to her paws, beckoning to them softly. "In the meantime, Mudpaw and Mousepaw are making their first climb out of the camp now. Why don't we go watch?"

Oatkit felt his paws tingle with excitement. When kits first become apprentices, their first landmark of the role is their climb out of

camp. The edges of the dip they called home were steep and covered with hard stone and roots. It was a climb a little kit could barely make, but as apprentice with some aid from a mentor, it became an easy climb for those of CoppiceClan. Mudpaw and Mousepaw had just become apprentices yesterday, and with today being their first venture outside of camp, it was sure to create a buzz.

The tom kit pranced after his mother and sister, a stir already erupting in the clearing. Cats were gathering to talk about Minnowshine having her kits and now Mudpaw and Mousepaw readying for their first steps outside the camp. Their gazes snapped over to a strolling Oatkit and Cloudkit as the two kits trailed after their mother, and low, exhilarated murmurs surrounded them.

"Kits and an apprentices first climb in one day! These kits really have started a greatness for our clan!"

"Their arrival has been a virtue!"

"I wonder how much more promising things will get once they're older!"

Oatkit felt his fur fluff with pride - though hidden under his skin was a twinge of anxiety.

Their mother led them towards the front of the crowd where Talonstar stood alongside Berrytuft, Webtail, and Viperleap. She greeted Talonstar with a purr, settling in beside the tom with still some space between them. Oatkit's heart leapt out of his chest when their father swiveled his head to grant his kits a smile, beckoning with his paw for them to sit between him and Daisyspring. Oatkit and Cloudkit didn't hesitate, Oatkit almost standing over his father's paws with how close he attempted to be to him.

Mudpaw and Mousepaw were ahead, Crowbite and Doebounce standing alongside their apprentices. Mudpaw stood with his head held tall and pride burning in his green eyes, whilst his sister appeared more startled with the task at hand. Despite being a Starlinked apprentice, Mousepaw was still expected to make the climb and even train in hunting and fighting from time to time, but

she was very comfortable in the being confined to herbs and healing for most of her life. She never had a problem with being a Starlinked from the moment she had the ability to voice her concerns.

"You've got this! That's my kits!" Webtail shouted from the crowd, Viperleap rolling her eyes at her mate.

Doebounce flicked her tail to signal for the apprentices to start, the she-cat herself beginning the climb. Mudpaw and Mousepaw were right behind their mentors, shoulders rippling under their fur as they shifted their weight forward for the steep climb. Doebounce showed them when and where to leap if the climb was too steep to walk, and though Mousepaw nearly stumbled a few times, the apprentices followed with ease.

"Here soon, that will be you both up there," Talonstar voiced, glancing sideways at his kits. "And I may not cheer as loudly as Webtail, but I'll still be just as proud."

Oatkit purred in delight at his father's words, turning to his mom just in time to catch her shoot him a pointed look. "Yes, we both will," Daisyspring added, her voice soft and drawn-out to emphasize on her words.

Their parents hadn't necessarily always enjoyed one another's company since they were born. When Oatkit tried to ask Minnowshine why, she said it was a phase all mates went through when they had kits, and she expected to eventually have her own grumpy moments with Sandnettle.

Nearing the top of the climb, they took their last bounce up and out of the camp. Mousepaw nearly lost her footing but Crowbite was quick to nudge his apprentice into balance again, the two sharing a smile at her achievements. Once they finished their climb, both apprentices and their mentors looked back down into the camp. Mudpaw's chest fur was fluffed out in pride and chin held tall, and Mousepaw looked to her brother and attempted to mimic his way of showcasing their triumph.

"This feeling of being a proud father might just stop my heart and

take my breath if it continues," Webtail exaggerating from in between Talonstar and Viperleap.

Viperleaf playfully shoved her mate with her shoulder. "Oh quit it, they'll be picking your ticks instead of elders' if you continue."

Once the apprentices disappeared over the camp walls for their first training sessions, cats began to disperse immediately. Oatkit still stared up the wall, his eyes round with enthusiasm. *I can't wait for that to be me,* he thought, his front paws dancing up and down as if he could run laps around the camp from his excitement.

Talonstar stood to his paws from beside him, dipping his head to Daisyspring. "I'm going to grab some prey for Fernstep since Flickerpaw is out on a hunting patrol. Would you like to accompany me?"

Their mother was silent for a second, then a sudden voice erupted from behind them.

"Hey!"

They all turned collectively to eye Sandnettle, the tom's face molded in every corner with a distinct happiness. His smile was practically burned onto his face forever.

"Minnowshine had our kits! She said Oatkit and Cloudkit could come and meet their denmates!" Sandnettle announced with a purr.

Talonstar murmured a congratulations to the tom while Daisyspring guided her kits forward with her tail. "You two go with Sandnettle and meet the kits. I'll catch up later."

Oatkit and Cloudkit didn't have a single argument for their mother's orders, bouncing over to Sandnettle's side in an instant. He dipped his head respectfully to Daisyspring and Talonstar before he shifted around, guiding Oatkit and Cloudkit towards the Starlinked den where Minnowshine must've been residing during the birth.

"Now, you two be gentle and keep your voices down. Minnowshine has had a long morning, but she'll still be happy to see you," Sandnettle informed.

Oatkit beamed at the new father. Sandnettle was a slightly older warrior in comparison to Oatkit's parents, but he was well-respected. He and his sister, Honeyshine, were the kits of the leader before Talonstar known as Goldenstar. Their father was told to be one of the longest leaders had ever lived, Honeyshine and Sandnettle even having been his second litter with a different mate. They lost their father, mother, and half-brother last leafbare to a severe greencough outbreak, and Oatkit's father had been leader ever since then.

He led them towards the Starlinked den that was lined with bramble vines and shrubbery. Stones jagged out from the walls beside the hallow. It was a more secluded, kept away den, but as they entered it Oatkit realized how immense the inside of it was. It was open and cool, a breeze flitting through it and wafting around the fragrant scent of herbs. It the center of the den stirred a tired Minnowshine with three bundles of paw pawing and mewing at her belly. Gorsefeather had just pulled her muzzle away from them, finishing her blessings over the new kits.

"So, any Starlinked?" Sandnettle asked his mate and Gorsefeather, his gaze vibrant.

Minnowshine shook her head. "No, my love, all just young, fine warriors to be," she purred, though Sandnettle looked ever so mildly disappointed. She then adjusted her gaze to Oatkit and Cloudkit, beckoning them forward. "Come closer. I want you to meet your denmates."

Oatkit was quick to bound forward, Cloudkit right at his side. He parted his jaws in a toothy grin as he glanced over the squirming bundles of fur, their pelts still wet from Minnowshine's grooming. Two of them looked just like their mother though one's pelt was slightly darker, and the other looked like a paler version of Sandnettle.

"The darker tom is Sagekit, then there's she-kits Pebblekit and Poppykit. Poppykit looks just like her father," Minnowshine purred, Sandnettle approaching to touch noses to his mate.

Three kits and two new apprentices! Maybe we were a sign for

CoppiceClan's future, Oatkit thought to himself, pride flaring strongly in his chest.

"Maybe I'll be able to mentor one of them! I think I'll pick Poppykit," Cloudkit chirped.

Sandnettle giggled at the little molly. "Don't be silly! By the time you're older apprentices, they will be apprentices as well. You may not be mentoring them, but you'll still be able to accompany them in some training."

"And we'll be the best of friends!" Cloudkit blurted, beaming over the squirming kits.

The kits mewed loudly and Oatkit's muzzle scrunched up in irritation. "Do our denmates have to be so loud though?"

"They're kits, Oatkit. You were just as loud when you were little," Gorsefeather snorted as she returned to her herb storage. "Now, I want Minnowshine and her kits to stay here for the night. She needs as much rest as possible and I want to recheck Pebblekit as well."

"Is she okay?" Oatkit instantly asked.

Gorsefeather nodded. "She's fine. Some kits have troubles breathing if they had a difficult arrival. It's minor but worth monitoring."

"And with that, how about I take you kits back to the nursery to wait for your mother?" Sandnettle suggested. There was a worried tone to his voice as he glanced back to his mate and kits for a moment. "I'll even tell you a story along the way."

Cloudkit was jumping up and down right away at Sandnettle's words. "Of course!"

"I'll be back later," Sandnettle murmured to Minnowshine before he turned to guide the kits out the den.

They strolled along with Sandnettle, a light buzz outside the den. Cats had returned from the morning patrols, dropping off their prey in the fresh-kill pit and checking in with their loved ones and friends. Flickerpaw was showing off a large squirrel to his mother,

Flamedance. Willowmist was talking comfortably to her brother, Webtail, and Viperleap in a stream of sunlight to bask in. Stormyheart hopping down the steep edges of the camp with his border patrol consisting of Patchsight and Rockfoot returning with him. It was a normal, near afternoon stir, and Oatkit couldn't wait to be apart of it.

"Y'know when I was a kit, I made it my sole mission to leave the camp before I was even an apprentice," Sandnettle admitted. "My mother eventually tried to assign cats to guard at the nursery exit so they could catch me before I was trying to scale my way out. I was so dedicated though that a few days before I was made an apprentice, I managed to make it halfway up the wall before my father scooped me up and stopped me. He told me he *knew* I could do it, but he wanted me to wait for my big moment. When it was time for me to climb that wall, it felt better than it would've ever had if I did it without a crowd and just angry parents...."

"... Aaand I'm telling you kits this story because I believe with every toe on my paws that one of you will impatiently try to do all the same," Sandsettle finished with a laugh. "So be sure to tell your father the wisdom I've bestowed, ay?"

Oatkit huffed. "Why would you assume-"

"Yep, I would've totally done it," Cloudkit admitted, sticking her tongue out. "And I'm probably still going to think about it."

Sandnettle and Cloudkit shared a chortle whilst Oatkit's gaze trailed back to the camp walls. He wasn't impatient enough to want to pelt up it before his apprenticeship, but he couldn't wait for the day when he could. Every cat would cheer his name and his father would be so proud of him. He would lead the promising future him and his sister were expected to bring.

But little did he know the burden that actually was.

chapter three

SWIFTWIND THE NEXT MORNING WAS QUICK TO ASSIGN GALETOOTH on a hunting patrol with Lightpaw and Hollynose, though Frostspider insisted he accompany them as well. The white and brown tom grumbled to himself at Rainstar's antics, the silver leader standing next to Swiftwind as he assigned the patrols with a beam directed to Galetooth. He knew she only wanted to look out for him, but in all honesty he'd rather spend his day cooped up in camp than hunting and sharing tongues.

Lightpaw was excited about the event, bouncing up and down next to Galetooth. When she was severely ill alongside her mother, Galetooth and Frostspider were constantly taking care of them when the Starlinked's paws were full. Frostspider was terrified he'd lose either of them and Galetooth felt the need to assist. If Galetooth's mate and kit were sick like that as well he knew his brother would help, and perhaps that was what persuaded him to be there for Frostspider. Being around such ill cats though kept him away from his mate in case of contagion, so he was away from her for the whole two moons they were sick.

He returned to a love with no breath left. He wished he could have those two moons back.

Lightpaw grew to really enjoy Galetooth's company though. She liked the stories he would tell to her while she was nest-ridden and ill. He would cheer her up with jokes and tales of how her father was as an apprentice. Now she tended to try and be around Galetooth as much as possible, but he only felt a twinge of jealousy and sorrow crawling eerily under his skin when she and Frostspider were around. He had tried to actively avoid them since the loss of his mate, and whether it was because of the resentment of what they got to have or the selfishly placed blame he held he couldn't even pinpoint himself.

"Can I show Galetooth my stalking!? I've improved so much," Lightpaw chirped to Hollynose.

She nodded and glanced to Galetooth. "Of course you can."

Lightpaw was behind on her apprenticeship in comparison to Snowpaw. Lightpaw's illness even after it ended left her body weak for two moons and closer to the end of that time, Snowpaw had become an apprentice whilst Lightpaw had to wait until her full recovery. Now another two moons later, Lightpaw found herself a moon behind, but she was dedicated to catch up.

Hollynose shared a dip of her head to Swiftwind and her sister before she took lead of the patrol, tail flicking rhythmically to and fro. Lightpaw was her first apprentice and in all truthfulness if she had an apprentice ever before her sister, she would be leader instead of Rainstar. Their brother, Darkcloud, was too stubborn and arrogant to ever be considered for the position by Violetstar when Bearbelly passed, and with the leader being on her last life she needed a quick recovery to the deputy role. Hollynose was an astounding warrior but Rainstar was a close second and the only one with an apprentice at the time, leaving the Starlinked due to Violetstar's illness to eventually select her. Rainstar only got to be deputy for a few moons before suddenly she was leading all of ValeClan.

Frostspider strolled to Hollynose's side as they padded outside of camp, glancing the she-cat over from toes to ears. It was no rumor that Frostspider was *the* gossiper of the Clan. Galetooth's brother loved to shove his muzzle in every cat's business and make it his own. He had rather solid advice though, so whilst some cats snapped at him some didn't entirely mind the warrior's pestering.

"So you and Sunsong, eh?" He nagged, earning an eye roll and huff from Hollynose. "What!? I think it's cute. At least you're finding some cat unlike Darkcloud and Rainstar. I also find it endearing that you're both bonding through training my daughters."

Lightpaw puffed out her chest from beside Galetooth. "What can I say, father raised me to be an excellent mate-matcher."

"Well, you two can go play mate-matcher elsewhere," Hollynose dismissed. "Like with Galetooth, your brother, for example."

Galetooth felt his pelt prickle at Hollynose's mention of him. Lightpaw beamed over her shoulder at him as she slowed her pace to match his. He caught only a little smiler from Frostspider, faded with an obvious concern.

"She's right! Have eyes for any cat, Galetooth?" Lightpaw pried, nudging him lightly with her shoulder.

He shot her a sideways glare and hastened his pace, ignoring her question. Lightpaw's ears folded back in reaction to his look, the she-cat taking the hint and not attempting to catch back up to him. Hollynose glanced after him puzzled as Galetooth took the lead to escape their tongue-sharing antics. He didn't want to gossip or discuss his life with any of them, even if Frostspider knew every detail and had their entire life. All he wanted was to be far away from them and hunt on his own, just as he had done moons before all the time. He would hunt morning and night and bring back his catches to his love every time. He never contributed to ValeClan's prey-pile unless he had to.

She was all that ever mattered.

"How about we split up?" Frostspider advised, Galetooth pausing to acknowledge his brother. "I'll hunt with Galetooth and Lightpaw with Hollynose."

"But I wanted to show Galetooth my improvements!" Lightpaw pouted in disagreement.

Frostspider placed a paw on his daughter's head to ruffle her fur. "You can later. Don't you want to make sure you get some refreshers from your mentor so your moves are perfect for showcase?"

Lightpaw nodded curtly, eyes gleaming at the idea. "You're right! Let's go, Hollynose!"

The orange molly was pelting off in an instant, barely giving Hollynose enough time to blink even. Her mentor groaned and shot Frostspider and Galetooth one last, annoyed stare before she continued off. "See you soon then."

As the two disappeared over the valley, Frostspider swiveled his head around and twitched his ears at Galetooth. "Lighten your mood, ay? This is the first time Lightpaw's really gotten to hang out with you since she was sick," Frostspider snapped at his brother. "She looks up to you."

"I don't want to *hang out*, Frostspider, I just want to be left alone," Galetooth growled back, his tail lashing as they stood face-to-face. They grew up close but also not *that* close. They were known to bicker and point out one another's bee-brained thinkings in a heartbeat.

"I don't think ignoring every cat and being to yourself all the time is going to solve your problems," Frostspider countered. His gaze softened a bit and he shook his head with a sigh. "I know she's gone and you loved her, but it's time to-"

"Don't say it," Galetooth sternly stated.

"... Move on," Frostspider finished, their gazes burning into one another's with the ash settling at their paws.

Galetooth's tail bushed out not only out of anger but the cold chill of fear that crawled over his skin at Frostspider's advice. He knew as days passed the sadness of her loss would begin the mellow and settle as just a memory, but the idea of those days terrified him. He could sit and wallow in his mourning for ages if it still meant the ability to think about her constantly. The grief of losing her was the closest grasp he had to her now as torturous as it was... and he didn't want to lose that as much as it teared him apart day by day.

"I don't want to talk about this right now, let's just hunt," Galetooth snorted, turning away from Frostspider. "And if you keep your mouth shut, I'll let Lightpaw show me her improvement later."

Frostspider didn't argue but Galetooth could feel his brother's gaze scorching into his back. He knew in the end all his brother wanted was the best for him as most of their argument revolved around him attempting to give advice to Galetooth, but his brother always had it easier than him. He and Emberberry had been mates since they became warriors and had two lovely daughters under their names.

Through any peril they went through, they got to be at one another's sides and make it through each time. Galetooth wished he could say the same.

He padded across the valley and into the taller grass, trees densely scattering the land. Frostspider had eventually caught up and lowered his haunches, though the tall, white tom found it difficult to make himself hidden. Galetooth followed his movement, stalking alongside him as his muzzle twitched to the scent of a rabbit ahead. He carefully eased forward, every pawstep thoughtful and cautious as he crept through the tall grass. Galetooth then glanced sideways at his brother, noting his slower pace to try and keep himself hidden. Frostspider's advantage was his agility, not his stealthiness, and Galetooth knew that all too well.

"Take the right and get ready to flank. I'm going to steer it as close to your path as possible," Galetooth murmured.

Frostspider was obliged to follow, Galetooth holding back a huff at his knowing smile. Galetooth had always loved hunting strategically, even if he wasn't the greatest at it. Deep down, there was a thrill pounding at his heart for the chase ahead, focus keeping the tom's eyes locked ahead. His mind never wandered from his loss though no matter what. Never.

As his brother stalked off, Galetooth kept his steady prowl ahead. He was coming up on the rabbit, noticing its scent grow stranger and a shuffle in the grass ahead. His muscles rippled under his shoulders as he kept low to the ground, underbelly brushing the dirt and eyes narrowed. He could feel his heartbeat in his pads and his ears as adrenaline began to sear through his body. Then as he assumed he gave his brother enough time to get in position, Galetooth applied all his power to his rear legs and used them to launch himself forward, paws outstretched towards his prey.

But his eyes went wide. Instead of a terrified rabbit beginning to hop away, the shape of his mate stared back at him. Apprehension lined her round, amber eyes as she watched her mate throw himself at her. Blood matted her once beautiful, creamy fur now torn and knotted, and both of her ears were nothing but a shred of fur. Her shoulders and limbs were ripped open to see her bones and her tail

was nothing but a nob. Her neck was bit into with blood poured around her paws, staining her white toes a sickening crimson.

She looked just as he had last seen her - dead and demolished - one of the only ways he could bring himself to see her again.

He nearly didn't manage to land, the vision of his mate disappearing as his paws met the earth and fell short of the rabbit. The rabbit was now pelting through the tall grass to get away from Galetooth, who felt himself frozen to the ground as he only watched it flee. Luckily, Frostspider had successfully taken a well-placed flank, the white tom launching himself at the panicked rabbit. With one swift nip to its neck, Frostspider claimed his prey with a prideful grimace. He shot his gaze over to Galetooth though who still remained unmoved, the image stuck in his head as he watched the rabbit take its last breath underneath Frostspider's paws.

Frostspider picked up the rabbit and snaked over to Galetooth, setting it down between them as he spoke to him. "What is wrong, brother?" Frostspider asked in a soft whisper. "I know these last few moons havent been easy but you're more on edge than usual."

It was true. It wasn't his usual mourning and it was now laced with the attachment to Rainstar's story.

"If you lost Emberberry ever so suddenly, would you do whatever it takes to bring her back?" Galetooth questioned, earning a head tilt from Frostspider.

"Bring her back? That's not even possible," Frostspider noted.

Galetooth shook his head and met his brother's gaze to establish his seriousness furthermore. "But if it were, would you?"

They stood there for a moment with gazes locked until Frostspider slowly nodded his head. "Yes, I would." But then it was as if he noticed the light in Galetooth's eyes in his answer, and his softer approach immediately changed. "But we can't chase after ghosts, Galetooth. Fate is fate no matter how awful it is. That's-"

"You'd chase her ghost and you know it," Galetooth snapped icily,

earning a wince and step back from Frostspider. "You try to sound so wise and like you know what it's like to be in my paws and you *don't*. You don't know what it's like for your love to be treated in all its time like it's treachery. You don't know what it's like to barely be able to see her and not even know what moment you had to last cherish. I didn't see her for moons before she died because of *you* and your *still alive* daughter and mate. You are lucky, and it is so unfair."

Frostspider's ears fell flat. "You're right, I'm lucky... Lucky to have a brother like you as well who took care of my daughter while she was ill. You gave up precious time with your mate for me... and I'm sorry."

Galetooth glanced away from him, his fur bristled angrily along his spine. "You're not sorry. If you were sorry, you'd quit telling me to move on."

"All I want is for you to take care of yourself. I care about you," Frostspider soothed, reaching a paw for his brother's shoulder. "And I knew how much you loved her."

Galetooth stepped away from his touch, refusing to stare back at him. The word *loved* battered around in his eardrums like an untamed flame. He was *still* in love with her - ghost or not.

"Tell the others I didn't feel good and headed back to camp early," Galetooth ordered sharply. "I'll watch Lightpaw's hunting another day."

"Galetooth, just listen to me!" Frostspider stammered, a more stern tone to his voice. Galetooth had began to pad away but paused for a moment to listen briefly to his brother. "I don't want to lose you as a brother and as a friend. Every cat here feels you drifting and all of them except me, Swiftwind, and Rainstar don't know why. I don't want you to live the rest of your life unhappy and alone. You are a great warrior and even capable of a leadership one day here in ValeClan. Why waste all that potential and all that future happiness?"

His claws found the earth and sunk into them, a venom running

harshly through his blood. His chest stung and ached. "Because I wanted all of that with *her*."

"She's gone," Frostspider reminded, this time more solemnly.

Galetooth *hated* those words. His stomach churned in a sickening motion and a growl rumbled in his throat. He simply shook away his brother's words though, ears flat as he sauntered back through the valleys. He didn't dare to look back at Frostspider even as he felt his brother's gaze follow him over the hills. His brother meant a lot to him, but his mate had meant every star to speckle a cold night sky to him. His advice was nothing but bitter and unfathomable to Galetooth, and he didn't have the strength through all of his agony to listen to it anymore.

As he stood atop one of the hills, he looked out towards the meadows that stretched towards where Rainstar and him had just visited yesterday. He used to talk that path almost every day to see what made him so willing to breathe, but now every breath was delivered in a painful rasp that rattled his chest every time. If Rainstar's stories of what Ibistide believed were true, he would have a reason to take that path again, and that was all he ever wanted.

chapter four

CLOUDKIT HAD SPENT ALL MORNING GETTING GROOMED BY HER MOTHER to look as presentable as possible for her ceremony. She didn't mind her mother's cold tongue lapping at her fur to settle uneven bristles and loose strands. Oatkit had complained about his and ended up with still a loose hair or two by his ears, but Cloudkit adored the attention from her mother. Plus, she was adamant about looking perfect for her ceremony.

It had been two moons since Minnowshine had her kits. Poppykit, Sagekit, and Pebblekit were now old enough to move around and observe, as they were while they waited for Oatkit and Cloudkit's ceremony. Sagekit was nothing but an extra toe to Minnowshine, the darker silver tom glued to his mother's side at all times as he watched from afar. Pebblekit and Poppykit were all about socialization, the two bouncing around Oatkit as Daisyspring finished grooming Cloudkit.

"We can't wait to be apprentices with you two!" Pebblekit squeaked.

Oatkit looked mildly annoyed, but happy to gloat. "Well, you still have four moons, but by then we can show you so much of everything we've learned."

"Then in the far future, we'll all be strong warriors together," Cloudkit added with a puff of her chest fur.

"Who are you hoping your mentors will be?" Poppykit questioned with a curious twitch of her ears.

"I'm hoping for Berrytuft! She's deputy and one of my dad's good friends," Oatkit voiced.

"I don't really care who mine will be but Willowmist or her son, Stormyheart, would be nice," Cloudkit answered.

Daisyspring chuckled at the kits as she drew away from Cloudkit,

finishing her daughter's grooming. "There, all set. Your father will be so proud of the both of you," Daisyspring purred. She then glanced to Minnowshine with a grimace. "And I can't wait to finally be back as a warrior."

"Stars, me too," Minnowshine agreed with a stifled laugh.

Cloudkit often forgot her mother was ever a warrior. She had told stories of her and Talonstar's apprenticeship and more, but not usually. Their mother tended to stray away from her own stories and told others, but the kits had no complaints - in fact, it was only now Cloudkit had realized that.

"May all cats gather before Highledge for a clan meeting!"

Talonstar's voice echoed into their den and stimulated a wave of excitement. Poppykit and Pebblekit were overjoyed with a little prance to show it whilst their mother and brother watched them with a grin. Daisyspring stood to her paws and guided Cloudkit and Oatkit towards the exit, the two almost stunned in place at the approach of their ceremony. Cloudkit felt his paws tingle with joy and electricity prickle at her fur as she padded outside, Oatkit falling into step with her.

Cats were gathered in the clearing faster than they had ever seen before. There was almost a perfect path made by them for Cloudkit and Oatkit to take the center, their clanmates watching them with wide, beaming eyes. They mumbled congratulations to Daisyspring as they followed behind them, the mother dipping her head to her acquaintances and purring a thanks back. Mudpaw and Mousepaw made their appearance amongst the crowd, shouting out about how they couldn't wait to have other apprentices with them as Doebounce shook her head at them both. Atop the highledge ahead stood Talonstar with Berrytuft close by his side, the powerful tabbies amber eyes plastered to both of his kit. Cloudkit grinned up at her father as her and Oatkit took their stand in the center of the clearing.

"We are gathered here today for my kits, Oatkit and Cloudkit, to become apprentices and learn the way of a warrior!" Talonstar's voice boomed across camp, a cheering following his announcement.

It was more of a clamor than usual at a ceremony, Cloudkit's eyes round at the ruckus. Talonstar silenced them though after a moment with a flick of his tail, amber eyes staring down proudly at his kits. "Do the both of you believe you have what it takes to be a warrior?"

Oatkit and Cloudkit were quick to nod, sharing a glance as they spoke simultaneously. "Yes!"

Talonstar and Berrytuft both smiled at them as the leader continued. "With the power vested in me by the ancestors, I hereby declare you both as apprentices of CoppiceClan! Oatkit, you shall now be known as Oatpaw till you receive your warrior name. Willowmist will be your mentor."

Lucky rock-head, Cloudkit thought with a huff under her breath. Willowmist was a brilliant warrior, the dark gray tabby stepping out of the crowd to approach Oatpaw. The two of them touched noses and she settled in beside him, Oatpaw still incredulously beaming at his selected mentor.

"Cloudkit, you shall now be known as Cloudpaw until you receive your warrior name. Sandnettle will be your mentor," Talonstar added with a nod over to the sandy tabby.

Good thing I'm just as lucky! Cloudpaw lifted her muzzle up as Sandnettle strode from out the crowd. He padded up to her with an amused look, their cold muzzles touching as the ancestor's welcomed him as her mentor. She swore the breeze in that moment that flit through her fur was a note from the ancestors that Sandnettle was going to make her the finest warrior ever to be witnessed in CoppiceClan.

"Cloudpaw! Oatpaw! Cloudpaw! Oatpaw!"

The clan broke into a symphonic yowl of their names as their mentors settled in at their sides. Cloudpaw shut her eyes and puffed out her chest, taking in the cheers. The loudness of it all almost made her ears roar with blood but the embrace of it was worth it. Daisyspring and Talonstar always told them the Starlinked said they were special, and so far this was the liveliest moment to show their singularity. All of CoppiceClan was looking forward to their future.

Cloudpaw couldn't help but feel an uneven twist in her stomach even with all the pride of it though.

When the cheering died, Talonstar glanced over the crowd one last time. "Tomorrow morning their training will begin and they will make their first trek outside of camp! CoppiceClan, you are dismissed."

As the crowd diminished, Oatpaw hopped in place from beside Cloudpaw. "We did it! We're apprentices!" He meowed to her.

"This is only the easy part, silly," Cloudpaw huffed, bemused at her brother.

"How about you both meet the other apprentices? Webtail had Mudpaw and Mousepaw prepare your nests earlier," Willowmist proposed to the two with a purr, Sandnettle nodding along.

Before Cloudpaw could reply to their mentors, Talonstar had climbed down from the highledge and made his way over to them. They both stood in their father's shadow with delight written over their faces. Sandnettle and Willowmist disappeared back into the camp as Talonstar dismissed them with a flick of his tail, the leader's gaze scanning pleasingly between his daughter and son. Cloudpaw froze under his staring, her heart rocketing around in her chest. They had barely spoken to their father for the last two moons and now he stood before them like the proudest father in the forest.

"You both will make wonderful warriors one day," he mumbled, reaching forward to take a moment and press his muzzles to each of their ears. Cloudpaw shivered at her father's touch. She had longed for the day he would just speak to them again.

Daisyspring had stepped out of the crowd and to his side, another moment so rare with their growth. She brushed her pelt against his as they both stood before their kits as the parents of something special for the future of CoppiceClan.

There was something broken about the stares of their mother and father though. Something Cloudpaw noticed but couldn't quite place.

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Cloudpaw had slept a little restlessly throughout the night. The light gray pointed molly could admit she wasn't used to not being able to bundle up in the warmth of her mother's pelt as she slept. Mudpaw had shown them to their den and gloated over his preparation of their nests, Mousepaw irritably watching as her brother took all the credit. Cloudpaw was thankful for their welcoming but all night she shifted and woke constantly, not used to cold air pricking at every side of her pelt as it flit into their den. She hated to say it but it almost made her miss being a kit tucked away safely in the nursery.

When morning came Oatpaw was shoving her right at the crack of sunset, demanding she get to the clearing for their first climb out of camp. She groggily stood to her paws, fur lightly disheveled along with her new bedding. Her ears folded and heated up in embarrassment at her obvious tussle with sleep already half-ruining her nest. She turned to ask Oatpaw if he had troubles sleeping as well but her brother was already launching himself out of the den.

"It's okay, I'll fix it while you're out training."

Mousepaw's voice made her nearly jump out of her own fur. "Oh erm, you really don't have to... I just move a lot in my sleep," Cloudpaw nervously laughed in response.

"It's alright, really. We all have problems sleeping in the first quarter moon," Mousepaw reassured, pressing closer to the she-cat with a comforting smile. "You'll get used to it soon enough."

Cloudpaw stepped back anxiously for a moment at the super friendly approach from the she-cat. She had known Mousepaw and Mudpaw shortly before they left the nursery, but with her clinging to her mother she didn't interact with the both of them as much as Oatpaw. She flashed the she-cat a little grin back so she didn't make the interaction *too* awkward, though Mousepaw noticed her obvious discomfort. The Starlinked apprentice strode towards the exit, beckoning to Cloudpaw with her tail.

"C'mon then, today marks your first day on the path to be a

warrior," Mousepaw purred.

With a sharp inhale, Cloudpaw gathered all her courage and followed after the other she-cat. She could feel her exhaustion from little sleep tugging at her paws and face but she shook it off, trying to get any taste of energy that she could grasp. Cats were scattered about in camp, all of their gazes linked to the stoney escape of the camp walls. Mousepaw guided her through the crowd and to the front where Oatpaw, Sandnettle, and Willowmist stood looking up the climb. Willowmist was mumbling a few notes to Oatpaw and Sandnettle was looking side-to-side for his apprentice.

"Best of luck!" Mousepaw mewed to Cloudpaw, stepping aside and dipping her head to respectfully bow the she-cat forward.

Cloudpaw nodded back to Mousepaw in a silent thanks to her. She padded up to Sandnettle who noticed her in a heartbeat, beaming at his apprentice. Oatpaw and Willowmist smiled over to her, her brother's mentor greeting her with a little half-wave of her paw. Sandnettle drew his tail reassuringly over Cloudpaw's shoulder, bending down a little to match the level of the smaller molly.

"Are you ready for this?" He mumbled to her with a grin.

Nervousness was churning around sourly in her stomach and chest but she nodded, passing him a devoted grin back. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"I'll be right behind you in case you slip. Use your claws to hold to the walls and put all your power to your back legs when you jump. It may have looked big and scary when you were a kit, but in no time this will be the easiest thing you've ever done," Sandnettle directed. "You'll be able to scale and climb these walls through anything."

Her gaze scanned up the rocky slope. He was right as it didn't look as immense as it had when she was just a kit, but stones still jagged out and it was bound to still be a cautionary path. She took a breath and glanced to Oatpaw, her brother appearing a lot more confident than her. His chin was parallel to the slope, lifted to the sky with the sun peering through the trees ahead and shining against his

brown and white fur. It was no wonder he was special and he had little to prove, but Cloudpaw felt the weight of it all in her shoulders more than she ever had before. If she failed this climb, she'd look like some mouse-brain that the stars somehow granted a righteous destiny for the clans. She couldn't fail - never.

With a quick signal, Willowmist started up the exit with Oatpaw right on her tail. *She's not even worried about him falling!* Cloudpaw thought with a scoff. Her brother and mentor were practically in sync during the climb, Willowmist checking on him with a swift peer over her shoulder.

"He may have to follow her every move, but you won't have to follow mine," Sandnettle started, startling Cloudpaw out of her irritated thoughts. "You'll take the initiative. Judge your distance and show me the easiest path up the slope. In the end, you'll look a lot smarter no matter how many mistakes you make. Don't let it get to you."

Of course he noticed my staring, Cloudpaw thought, though she appreciated his words regardless. She pinned her ears back and leaped ahead, claws grasping the earth slope. She could feel her weight shift to her rear at the indentation of the slope, shifting all her power to match it. She veered around a few stones and loose roots as she climbed, nearly able to match Oatpaw's distance.

"Now the slope is going to grow a little stranger. You can either take moons and go around all the pointed stones or you can make them your path," Sandnettle called from behind her.

Cloudpaw had seen cats scale this slope before including Mudpaw and Mousepaw. She knew the stones were used in all cases and if cats didn't jump their way out they were likely to get laughed at later. She crawled onto the first set of jagged stones and glanced over to the others a little more up ahead. She sucked in a breath and thought of all her experience jumping and tumbling over her mother and stalking after mossballs her and her brother had been playing with. This was her first leap as not a kit though, but a *warrior* - and a special one at that.

She pounced forward and landed awkwardly on the stones, her

back paws nearly missing and causing her to tumble backwards a bit. She scooted forward though and balanced herself, hearing a faint cheering from Minnowshine and her kits within the crowd below. Cloudpaw beamed over the group of cats within camp, even catching the prideful stare of her father from the back of the crowd where he sat alongside Berrytuft. She was proving herself successfully, and adrenaline shot icily through her veins fueling her forward.

Sandnettle was right about the rocky slope being a lot easier than they thought. After a few more leaps - nearly still slipping on a few - Cloudpaw and Oatpaw had reached the top within mere tail-flicks of one another. Cloudpaw beamed over at her brother as he took his last jump, the brown and white looking a little disappointed that he arrived last but still smiling back at his sister. She shrilled excitement and bounced over to him, cuffing her paws over his ears.

"We did it! We finally did it!" She cheered, Oatpaw snorting amusingly and ducking away from her.

"That was super easy. Why couldn't I just do that as a kit? It would look *a lot* cooler," Oatpaw complained, eyeing Willowmist.

Sandnettle leaped up and over to the apprentices, settling in beside a chortling Willowmist. "Hey, it's cool regardless! Look at how tiny camp looks from up here!" Sandnettle noted with a beckon towards the edge of the slope.

Cloudpaw and Oatpaw swiftly padded over to the edge, eyes round as they looked down into the camp. The crowd was beginning to dissolve as they had finished their first climb. Minnowshine was scuttling along with her kits back to the nursery, Daisyspring right on her tail to help gather the excited balls of fur. Talonstar and Berrytuft were discussing amongst a small group of warriors, more than likely organizing their patrols for today. Mudpaw was emerging from the apprentice den as Mousepaw returned from the Starlinked den, a new wad of moss hanging from her jaws. All of their clanmates almost looked like blurs of fur from their viewpoint, and it made Cloudpaw wonder if that's how they appeared to their watchful ancestors.

And if so, why did they choose the blurred tufts of her born as her and her brother for such a special greatness?

chapter five

GALETOOTH'S NIGHTMARES FELT REAL AT TIMES, leaving his fur bristled and claws tearing through his nest when he woke. He dreamed of seeing his mate die, so vividly to a point where he woke with a twist in his stomach and sour taste of bile caked in his throat. He would see it over and over again, wolves shredding through her in front of him whilst he was frozen to the ground, unable to move with only the ability to cry out after her. It was grueling and haunted him every day to the point where sleeping felt impossible.

Then there was the rare moments where the dreams were lucid and light-hearted. There was the dreams where he'd see her in the meadow and they'd prance through the fields together just as they had before. He'd see her under starlit skies at the river of the gathering place and he'd even dream of her curled in a nest around a bundle of kits. He could sleep forever if those were his dreams, and every time he woke from them he tried over and over to sleep again and return to them. Galetooth would do anything to see her again alive and happy, and waking up from those dreams was torturous, for he had to wake in a reality where she was absolutely gone.

Or so he thought she was. Rainstar's stories about Ibistide and his ideas of revival intrigued Galetooth.

Emerging from the warriors den right at the wake of dawn, Galetooth scanned the camp to quickly notice Lightpaw carrying a stretch of mess towards the elder's den. He bounded forward to cut her off before she reached the den, hoping his franticness to approach her didn't startle the orange molly. She was smiling at his arrival though, barely able to articulate through the moss.

"Hey fere Galetoof," she expressed in a muffled meow. "Wannna pracfif hunting foday?"

Galetooth grinned faintly at her muffled speech. "Not today, but I

figured I'd allow you more time for hunting. You and Snowpaw are so close to being warriors, let me take that moss to the elders instead and you can go nag Hollynose to train," Galetooth suggested.

Lightpaw dropped the moss at his paws with little to no hesitation. "Thank you! You're the nicest. No wonder father always says you're the best brother any cat could ever ask for," she exclaimed before whirling around in search of her mentor.

Galetooth felt a pang in his chest at her words. To know that Frostspider spoke so highly of him to his kits was admirable, but also painful. He buried his thoughts away thought and dropped his head to pick up Lightpaw's discarded moss. He felt bad he made his idea seem nothing more than a friendly exchange to the apprentice, but he couldn't help but take the opportunity. He wanted to speak to Hollowshade without being a direct disturbance. The new moss bedding was his way in.

The elders den was more tucked away alongside the river and closest to the leaders den. It caved into a rather smaller chasm, as ValeClan especially wasn't used to having many elders. It was a case in which most warriors just chose to take the role till they died or many who reached the stage of retirement were taken out by a harsh leafbare or sickness right in that moment. Hollowshade had just recently retired from his duties, the older tom cat's limp finally bringing a strain to him. Fireflower meanwhile had been retired since her mate, Violetstar, had passed. The two elders brought each other a well-desired company as neither had kits nor ever planned on it, so just having one another was just fine.

He slipped into the den slowly not to startle the waking elders, the moss dangling from his jaws to and fro. He noticed the two friends were sharing the larger nest of Hollowshade's, Fireflower's old one lying in a corner all dusted and old. It was no wonder Lightpaw insisted on bringing them some new nesting. Hollowshade was already standing at Galetooth's arrival, the tom's eyes narrowed as they landed on the warrior. Fireflower was still stretching out her paws and parting her jaws in an exasperated yawn.

"Galetooth? Since when do warriors tend to us?" Hollowshade

addressed at his arrival, almost with a lick of bitterness.

The brown and white tom ignored Hollowshade's words, padding over to drop the new wad of moss a few pawsteps away from where they lay. "Lightpaw and Snowpaw are the only apprentices for now and so close to being warriors. I presumed they could use a day solely dedicated to training," Galetooth mumbled. He could tell Hollowshade was catching him in his lies though, eyeing him up and down. "...And I wanted to speak to you."

Fireflower shuffled a little, opening her eyes to glance up at the tom. "Hm? Since when do you older ones want stories?"

"Rest easy, Fireflower. I'll entertain this one," Hollowshade mumbled to her, his last words spoken with an icy stare towards Galetooth. He stood from beside the sleeping molly and beckoned Galetooth towards the back of the den, speaking to him in a low whisper. "She's dying, y'know. Heart problems, Sparrowbreeze says. Now isn't the time to be bothersome."

Galetooth's ears fell flat. Hollowshade was known to grow sour over the moons since he retired, but it was almost like he could foretell why Galetooth was there.

"I know and I sincerely apologize but I need your help," Galetooth breathed out. He hesitated for a moment on how exactly to bring up the situation that left Hollowshade with his torturous limp to begin with, but spoke before the tom grew impatient. "Do you think Ibistide is still alive?"

Hollowshade froze at his words, mouth half-parted in a moment of still shock. A low growl then rumbled in his throat. "I'd hope he's dead and buried by now."

Galetooth understood his ill-speaking of Ibistide, but he wanted to pry more out of the tom. He needed answers - a lead. "We all do but... If he were alive, where do you think he would've gone?"

"That mange-heart left the territory and never returned. If I were to guess even if he were alive, he's either a bitter loner or a pampered kittypet," Hollowshade hissed. He whirred around and turned his

back on Galetooth with a huff. "But I don't want to talk or even think about that tom. He tried to end my life with little reason. He was nothing but a mouse-brain chasing tall-tales no matter the blood it left him covered in."

There's a whole world outside the territories, but I guess this is the best answer I'm going to get, Galetooth thought. Him as an apprentice would've pleaded for the elders to tell more of their story, but he took note of the way Hollowshade was eager to withdraw himself from the conversation. He dipped his head respectfully to the elder and turned to leave.

"Why is it you seek my help about Ibistide?" Hollowshade suddenly spoke up, spitting out his enemies name like it was bits of a deathberry sitting on the edge of his tongue. Old poison.

Galetooth found his words lodged in his throat, unable to turn back and face the tom. "Just curious, that's all," he managed to reply, though he could feel Hollowshade's gaze clawing at his back.

After all, Galetooth knew what he had to do, and no cat was going to stop him. No cat ever stopped him before from seeing his love, whether it was that they didn't know about it or came to terms with his willingness. Rainstar, Swiftwind, and Frostspider had all hid his out-of-clan love for moons for him - they had to understand what his next step was.

Starting with Rainstar.

Galetooth felt a heaviness in his chest as he neared her den behind the small waterfall. Part of him was terrified he'd never see his kin or friends again, but he had grown so sick of his grief that this was his only answer to it. He lay low as he crept into her den, peering behind him back out into camp. Lightpaw had successfully pried Hollynose out of the warriors den to train, Snowpaw and Sunsong right at her side. Sunsong shared a smile with a groggy Hollynose that Galetooth knew all too well, and that only kept his pace going into the leader's den.

The silver molly was sat on her nest, tongue half-drawn to lick a paw but she paused at Galetooth's arrival. She dropped her paw

back to her nest in an instant, curling her tail around them in a formal manner. She always attempted to look well-postured around him and at gatherings from time-to-time, a notable smile drawn across her muzzle. Rainstar nodded in greeting to him as he awaited her permission to fully step in.

"Come in," Rainstar purred. His face was barren of a smile back though, to which the leader instantly noticed. "Up so early? Bad dreams? Was Spottedwish tussling and shouting in his sleep? I've heard he has interesting-"

"No, none of that," Galetooth dismissed, Rainstar blinking at his almost frantic cut-off. "I just... wanted to speak to you. That's all."

Rainstar's ears fell. He wanted to curse at how easy it was the molly to recognize his emotion even if he tried to hide it. She knew him all too well, and she knew a tiresome, long conversation was ahead of them. "Well, what is it? I have all morning, really. Swiftwind handles patrols really well."

Galetooth didn't know how to word it. He didn't want to be curt nor did he want to be confusing. He didn't want to sound apathetic or cruel towards her assistance and friendliness. Galetooth didn't want to hurt her feelings but in the end, he was bound to no matter what and he had already been knowingly taking swipes to her heart for moons.

"I'm leaving ValeClan."

Way too direct.

Rainstar's expression dropped as if she had witnessed a murder and her tail withdrew from his neat position. "What do you mean by that?"

"If Ibistide is out there, I can find him or even cats who have learned his methods and I can bring her back," Galetooth answered in what felt like one breath, his mouth going dry. "But who knows how long that find can take and-"

"Ibistide is *dead* and so are his so-called *methods,*" Rainstar hissed,

her tail now lashing behind her. She stood to her paws, her intent no longer on her posture but her standing on Galetooth's decision. "He tried to kill a cat with some hope he'd bring back the dead. How is leaving your home to chase a murderer a good decision?"

Galetooth shook his head. As much as it pained him to see her angry and part of him struggled to agree with her, he was reluctant to back down on pursuing those possibilities. "But that is why I can't be here. I can't live with myself without her. Every breath feels hard to take and my paws ache when I try to be a normal warrior. She was taken away from me and I can't shake that away. If there is a way to bring her back even with *murder,* then so be it."

"You are hollow-headed to believe such things," Rainstar snapped. Galetooth had never seen her so angry, at least at him, and it made a frown curl onto his face which didn't go unnoticed. The leader took a step back, unable to make eye contact with him as she stared at her paws. "We've gone over this so many times. Losing her was unfair, but perhaps Frostspider is right. It's time to move on. You don't have to take another mate or anything, but just live happily as-"

"No!" Galetooth growled, Rainstar's gaze rolling back up to him in an instant at his sudden, sharp tone. "It's a risk worth taking to me and even if I'm chasing nothing, maybe a journey to myself is what I need as well. I need *anything* but to be around here and mope."

Rainstar's anger was shaded over with a rift of sorrow now. "After all I have done for you... your brother and Swiftwind too... You think being around here is a *burden?*" Her teeth clenched and her next words were almost just a hiss of air. "You have only made it that way."

Galetooth's expression grew more stone-like. He was unwilling to break with more anger or a deepened frown. His words were final no matter their arguments, but he didn't want to appear odious towards his friends and their help as well. They had done plenty for them, but through all of it even his younger years before the grief, she had been his reason to breathe.

"I'm leaving and that's final," he stated plainly. "I'm sorry."

At his apology, Rainstar's lips fell out of a cold snarl and a look molded of melancholy and desperation formed on her face instead. It was as if she was uncertain in how to react to the situation, bouncing between her anger and sadness unevenly. "What if I gave you a reason to stay?" She then mumbled, almost too quietly to hear. "What if I told you something that would keep you here? Would you stay even then?"

Galetooth knew all too well what she was going to say and he couldn't even fathom why she thought that would convince him to stay. He had known since they were younger that Rainstar loved him, but he knew her as no more than a friend and always would. So in the end no matter her fighting and her pleading stares, Galetooth simply shook his head at her question.

Rainstar still wanted to say it from the look in her eyes and the part of her jaws, but the words struggled to leave her. She frowned once more and sighed. "Then so be it. You have chosen a path no tales can save you from," Rainstar growled. "I shouldn't have to give you any reasons to stay and I also after this give you no reason to return. If you leave, I will consider you *exiled* and to be off our territory by the end of the day. You will not be welcome into ValeClan ever again. You will not be able to see your brother ever again. No cat ever. You will be alone."

I'll feel just as you and CoppiceClan made her feel, Galetooth would've said, but he left those words floating hatefully in his mind. "Then so be it," he repeated. "But you will always be my friend and Frostspider my brother. Tell him I love him and hope his kits grow up strong and even worthy of a role like yours one day... I wish you all the best."

Galetooth expected more fighting. He expected Rainstar to fall to the ground and cry for his stay. He even at some point thought she was going to raise a paw and leave him with a nasty scar to haunt him on his travels. She stood there in the shadows of her den though, eyes narrowed and her face now just as stone-like as he had tried to conduct with his own. For once in his life through all their moons together, Galetooth could only predict how she was feeling, even as her final words said it all.

"I wish I could say the same for you."

chapter six

"THAT'S SO COOL, OATPAW!"

There was a prideful fluff to the young tom cat's pelt as a mouse dangled from his jaws. It was his first catch, an event almost so mind-boggling to the tom he could barely keep his paws off the ground as Willowmist congratulated him. He was eager to show it off to Minnowshine's kits the instant he got back to camp, the tom pelting into their den and nearly stimulating the queen to jump out of her own fur in panic. At the sight of a delighted Oatpaw though, she exhaled in relief and her kits were hopping over to him swiftly.

"A quarter moon of apprenticeship and you've already caught a mouse?!" Pebblekit exclaimed, rearing up to bat at the dead prey swinging from his jaws.

Sagekit delivered a shove to his sister, the fur along his shoulder bristled. "Don't touch it! What if it's still alive?"

"It's dead, I promise," Oatpaw purred. *As if I'd be mouse-brained enough to bring back* alive *prey,* he thought comically.

"Sagekit is just a scaredy-kit. He thinks rain would melt his pelt off," Poppykit teased, earning an annoyed huff from her brother.

Oatpaw grimaced at the kits as they bickered amongst each other for a moment. He whisked past them and dropped the mouse at Minnowshine's paws, the queen dipping her head to him respectfully. There was a burning in his chest as he succeeded in his first delivery, feeding a queen who cared for three little futures of their clan. He hoped he had plenty more hunts with prey to share amongst them all. He hoped he could always provide well for all of CoppiceClan.

"Oatpaw?"

The call of his name was not from the kits or their mother. He swiveled his head to focus on Mousepaw standing at the entrance to the den, her yellow eyes scanning over the kits then to him. Oatpaw and Mousepaw had grown to be good friends since they were apprenticed, already acquaintances from the days when Mousepaw and Mudpaw were still confined to the nursery with his sister and him. She always insisted on spectating his and Cloudpaw's training and catching them in the clearing to share tongues every once in a while.

He padded past the kits with a flick of his tail goodbye and up to Mousepaw, greeting the she-cat with a smile. "What's up? Did you hear about my catch?" Oatpaw asked, the urgency to boast almost humiliating the more he thought about it.

Mousepaw blinked and peered over his shoulder to Minnowshine, then shaking her head. "I hadn't heard but now I've noticed. Congratulations!" She started with a purr. "I just saw you coming this way and wanted to ask if you'd like to accompany Crowbite and I to gather some herbs. Crowbite hates when I nag him all the time if I can bring a friend but he always caves. Mudpaw is too busy these days to care. How 'bout it for you?"

"Ay, what's the harm? I'm down so long as they herbs don't smell too sour," Oatpaw chortling, his muzzle scrunching up at the recall of the scents the Starlinked den was overwhelmed with.

"You know I can't promise that," Mousepaw scoffed, turning and brushing her nose across the tip of his muzzle playfully. He nearly sneezed at the feeling of her fur, padding after her quickly to walk alongside her.

Viperleap always teased that Mousepaw and Oatpaw's personalities were suitable for one another, but the two always shooed off her prying. Mousepaw persisted she would rather never be tied to another paw and Oatpaw only viewed the molly as a good friend. He wanted to grow old with her in the sense of he was a wise leader and her a likewise Starlinked. They often talked about it, Mousepaw often joking she'd rather have a blade of grass lead the clan than him - rude, but that was her humor as he grew to understand.

Crowbite was waiting for them at the top of the climb which they reached effortlessly now with their training. The black furred tom eyed them both up and down, a grin soothing onto his face. "Are you ready to go *now*?" He mused.

"Yes, sorry to keep you waiting," Mousepaw apologetically stated with a bow of her head to her mentor.

Crowbite only lightly shook his head at her behavior and beckoned them into the woods. The tom was the youngest between he and Gorsefeather, once apprenticed to the older she-cat. Mousepaw was his first apprentice and Gorsefeather breathed down his neck fur constantly about how well their training was going. Gorsefeather was far more dedicated to her work as a Starlinked than Crowbite, as the star-seeing tom seemed to rather see the actual earth and the feel of it than what his role pathed him for. It was rumored he never wanted to be a Starlinked since he was younger but the ancestors painted him otherwise. He grew to accept it but still saunter from his duties more than Gorsefeather liked for him to.

They slipped through the woods hot on Crowbite's tail, the tom enjoying the show of his endurance through the undergrowth and over fallen logs. Oatpaw struggled to keep up after a moment, the brown and white tom huffing as his pelt nearly got tangled in a bramble bush. Mousepaw and Crowbite paused ahead of him, Mousepaw stifling a laugh at his vexation.

"If you're gonna be a leader someday, there will be tougher enemies than a bramble bush," she chuckled, earning a look from her friend.

"Mousepaw, how about you go that way and grab some chervil," Crowbite proposed with a sideways glance at his apprentice. "I'll have Oatpaw help me grab some cobwebs from the old fox burrows, and that should be enough to max our supply."

"I don't know why Gorsefeather insists we gather so much all the time," Mousepaw huffed under her breath as she slinked away, though her complaint was loud enough for them both to hear.

Oatpaw was reluctant to be left alone with Crowbite and away from his friend, but he didn't bother to argue the command either. It was

a nice feeling that the Starlinked trusted him enough to help, as he often heard Crowbite never let Mudpaw assist unless he had to. He followed the black tom right in his pawsteps.

They approached a mossier area of the woods, dense with trees and a hill of old stone and hard silt. There was dens dug into the surface just as their own sometimes were, though they were dug more narrowly at the entrance. The scent of them was putrid but ancient, baring no hint predators for moons. Oatpaw heard stories from before of how foxes used to live in the dens though CoppiceClan eventually chased them out, now using the old dens as a whispered about place to hide if needed or to Crowbite's need a collection of cobwebs.

Crowbite paused in front of the burrows, his tail brushing abruptly in front of Oatpaw to stop the apprentice. "I've been meaning to ask you something since you're not a kit anymore," Crowbite started, his voice a little lower and more serious.

"Yeah...?" Oatpaw murmured, blinking perplexingly.

"When every cat calls you special and prophesied, why do you think they do?" Crowbite questioned.

Oatpaw's gaze trailed off to the side, unsure of the Starlinked's purpose with his querying. "Well, mother told me when you blessed us you saw a greatness in us, and the word got around to every cat quickly," he answered.

Crowbite stepped more forward, his gaze scanning back to the old fox burrows. "I'm not meant to run my mouth about what I saw but if you're so prophesied, why can't you know what that means for you?" He suggested almost as if he were asking himself - or Gorsefeather, who Oatpaw believed in that moment was the only thing holding Crowbite back from speaking about it. "But if I tell you, you can't go 'round telling others. Got it? Gorsefeather would have my tail if she knew."

Oatpaw stiffened at his wording. He wanted to know what Crowbite saw and the curiosity was killing him, but there was a wave of anxiety that rippled under his pelt. What if Crowbite saw something

that twisted his whole entire future and how he thought it would go? He was destined for greatness but he didn't know of what kind, and that brought an uneven, sickening flip to his stomach.

"What... Did you see?" The question finally fell off his tongue seemingly landing with a heavy plop in front of him.

"When I blessed you and your sister it showed me the same vision: you and your sister fighting a tiger in the midst of the forest. It was reigning fire over the lands and devastation, but you and your sister reigned superior in the end," Crowbite stated, then continued on with a nervous snicker. "It sounds silly, really, but when Talonstar and Gorsefeather heard about it they pried that it was a sign you and Cloudpaw were destined to save the clan someday. Words slipped around quickly of a greatness I proposed for you both, but none of what I saw. In the end, it's all just some destiny the stars gave you, but I didn't see a vision like that when I blessed Mudpaw and Mousepaw."

"A *tiger?*" He exasperated the word, eyes wide. "Why would an ancient cat-"

"I wouldn't ponder on it, Oatpaw. Visions can mean such strange things sometimes, but I do believe your sister and you hold a great future for our clan," Crowbite cut off, cocking his head to grin faintly at him. "Which is why I figured I'd at least tell you about it, so long as you promise to keep it to yourself."

Oatpaw nodded curtly. "I promise."

"Good," Crowbite bluntly replied to end that conversation, swapping quickly with a swivel of his head around as if to ensure no cat was observing. "How about you reach into the narrower tunnels for some cobwebs and me the others? Just snag as many as possible, our stock isn't *that* low."

He doesn't quite like the responsibility of his role, does he? Oatpaw reflected, staring after the Starlinked and he lurked into one of the larger burrows. *Or the secrecy of it for that matter.*

With every pawstep towards the burrows his paws tingled. His

thoughts were racing with ideas of what Crowbite's vision meant. A tiger? The idea of him and his sister battling an ancient cat left to tall tales was ludicrous, but he liked the incredulousness of it. It felt a little heavy on his shoulders to carry the secret around even with how simple Oatpaw thought the vision was. He and Cloudpaw were destined to save CoppiceClan in some way, shape, or form and to him, what was the harm in every cat understanding the vision to know of their proposed greatness?

He slipped into one of the burrows, his rear paws flailing behind him until they caught the soil at the entrance. Oatpaw grumbled at the dust settling on his muzzle, dirt threading through his pelt. He spotted old cobwebs dressing the ceilings, the apprentice stretching out a paw to scoop them away. He then grabbed them carefully in his jaws, backing out of the burrow with a grunt as his rump scratched against the rough soiled top of the entrance.

Dirt settled on his face for a moment at his escape, the tom shaking his head and huffing to rid of it. His whiskers twitched and he glanced sideways at Crowbite, who already had cobwebs dangling from his mouth and had obviously been observing Oatpaw. The tom's fur fluffed up in embarrassment but Crowbite only stifled a laugh, beckoning to him with a lash of his tail.

"C'mon then, let's check in with Mousepaw."

Oatpaw trailed after Crowbite, tail attentive and straight in the air. It wasn't long before Mousepaw bursted out from the undergrowth, holding fern-like plants in her mouth with the roots intact. She had a mouthful leaving her unable to talk and able to just flash an exhilarate look to her mentor with her find.

"Our supply is be loaded for moons! Good thing 'cause Berrytuft is expecting Riverfrost's kits," Crowbite meowed, Mousepaw quickly shooting him a glare.

Oatpaw stared intensely at the Starlinked. "Berrytuft is having kits?"

Crowbite didn't react much to his blurted secret, instead he shrugged and emitted an awkward laugh. "Well, I guess I wasn't supposed to say that aloud. She'll be due in a moons time."

"But... she's deputy," Oatpaw expressed with a tilt of his head. How was she supposed to assign patrols and be apart of them if she were confined to the nursery with kits?

"I think Minnowshine won't mind caring for them or Riverfrost will volunteer his time once they are weaned," Crowbite reassured. "Berrytuft would never stray from her role. Talonstar chose his friend for a reason."

Crowbite then directed his attention away from them as he lead them back towards camp, Oatpaw left with a puzzled twist to his face and Mousepaw huffing after her mentor. When Oatpaw were to have his secrets, he knew what cat he *would not* tell it to. It was obvious Berrytuft didn't want her upcoming kits revealed quite yet and Oatpaw doubted even Talonstar knew. Gorsefeather didn't want Crowbite to spill information on his visions about Oatpaw and Cloudpaw, but first time alone with the tom the Starlinked was pouring out with the words like a waterfall after heavy rain. Oatpaw could admit he didn't understand why his visions were that much of a secret, but it still rattled the tom a little how loud-mouthed Crowbite was and so unconcerned at that.

Eventually they came to camp, bounding down the stone walls and into the clearing. Berrytuft was off to the edge of the clearing and speaking to Riverfrost in a whisper, her head ducked. Oatpaw felt a pang of sympathy for the deputy but quietly vowed to himself he wouldn't spill her secret. He was cheerful his father's friend was having kits. Daisyspring often told them stories of how Berrytuft, slightly older than her and Talonstar, had a mate long ago named Ivycrow. Her and Ivycrow were young and happy till Ivycrow died to a badger attack protecting the nursery. They all still murmured to this day of how the she-cat was a hero and Oatpaw believed it, but he knew this moment of moving on and having kits meant a lot to the calico she-cat after all those moons.

They trudged into the Starlinked den, Gorsefeather settled next to the herb storage in almost a lost trance. She noticed them after Crowbite cleared his throat, the older feline only half-smiling at her former apprentice. "Cobwebs and chervil?"

"Just like you asked," Crowbite purred as he set his cobwebs down

with the rest. "Mousepaw-"

Mousepaw had already set down her chervil and abruptly cut off her mentor before he could continue. "Can I go share some prey with Oatpaw before we start lessons?"

Gorsefeather appeared spiteful and ticked off by Mousepaw's interruption but Crowbite only grinned, dipping his head to his apprentice. "Of course! Don't be too long though! Oatpaw, you can leave your cobwebs here."

Oatpaw nodded and leaned forward to drop off the cobwebs, catching Gorsefeather staring at him out of the corner of his eye. To his surprise, the grumpy Starlinked shot him a full smile when she noticed him looking, and the softness of it almost startled Oatpaw. *Is she giving me special treatment because of the visions?* Oatpaw questioned in his head, whirling around to exit alongside Mousepaw.

The white furred molly appeared bothered. Her gaze was glued ahead as Oatpaw strolled alongside her, the tom peering her over with the expectation of her to complain or mock the other Starlinked. Her muzzle was scrunched though, ears pinned down and eyes narrowed. Oatpaw could sense her bitterness and it made him shrink away from his usual friendly nudge or swat at her ear, the silence stiff and painful.

Then in the blink of an eye, Mousepaw spun around in front of him with a dire expression. "He told you about the visions, didn't he?" She questioned in a low whisper that almost emerged as a growl.

Oatpaw was taken aback by Mousepaw's acute approach, but he nodded and answered his friend. "He did. I-"

"What did he tell you *exactly,"* Mousepaw asked, gaze jolting back and forth to make sure no other cats were within earshot of them.

"Something about Cloudpaw and I beating a tiger and saving CoppiceClan," Oatpaw followed, but then continued as he noticed a frown drop onto Mousepaw's face and the she-cat's gaze shy away. "Why is it such a big deal that we don't know what he saw?"

"Because it isn't just some simple kit-tale like he's making it sound," Mousepaw corrected in a cold snap, though she instantly shook her head and drew away from being bitter towards him. "He didn't tell you the whole truth, Oatpaw, and if he were to tell you the visions just like that, you *deserve* the whole truth."

Oatpaw's ears fell back and his shoulders sunk. "Do you know the whole truth?"

"I do," she plainly stated, though Oatpaw could spot the distant, sad gloss to her eyes even if he were fox-lengths away. "I never wanted to tell you but... You just can't tell Cloudpaw, okay? Not until the time is right."

Oatpaw shuffled a pawstep closer to his friend, their muzzles on a tail length away from tapping. He engaged in eye contact with his friend, the sorrow in her eyes delivering a sharp pang to his heart. This was his own destiny and his sister's they were conversing about, but yet Mousepaw's visible melancholy was almost overwhelming to him when it came to the topic. She spoke the next words in a slow, drawn tone as if she wanted them to sink in and settle for ages, or almost as if she was treading across a frozen pool after leafbare, careful not to fall in. Whatever it was, how she said it and what she said, it took what felt like moons to sit right in Oatpaw's head and to not deliver a great, agonizing slash to his chest.

"One of you is destined to die horribly in that fight."

chapter seven

GALETOOTH REMEMBERED HIS FIRST MEETING OUTSIDE OF A GATHERING WITH HER. They agreed to meet at the Stone Pools, a landmark on the border that the two clans shared. The two of them couldn't be regarded for trespassing so long as they maintained respectful distance of the others borders there, and it was usually a spot the leaders themselves would meet outside of gatherings to discuss anything important.

Galepaw had left to see her at dusk, slipping out of camp unseen as Bearbelly had left his guard positioning to go check on an ill Violetstar for a moment. He didn't tell no cat of his eagerness to meet her, even though he was sure Frostpaw was aware of his crush due to him being unable to not talk about her after every gathering. It made his brother snap at him and tell him it ridiculous for him to admire a she-cat from the other clan, but Galepaw was known for not listening.

When he arrived, she was already waiting for him. Her creamy white and gray pelt shimmered perfectly in the first wake of moonlight. Galepaw felt his fur heat up as he stepped towards her, but he halted in his tracks the minute another cat whisked to her side. His brown pelt was all too familiar and his showing made Galepaw frown in disappointment.

"I'm sorry, Talonflight insisted he come along," she sighed, the tom casting her a pointed look.

He got his warrior name. Gross. I hope mine's cooler than his, Galepaw thought with narrowed eyes directed to the tom. Talonflight was the nicest of the apprentices. He was boastful - way too much at that - and constantly in he and his brother's ears about how he was older and bound to be a leader one day. The tom was Galepaw's least favorite cat he had ever met.

"We're all friends here, right? Why can't I tag along as well," Talonflight noted with a grin flashed right at Galepaw.

"So long as you chirp less than the crickets, I suppose I don't mind your company," Galepaw half-lied with a huff.

Talonflight parted his jaws to emit what Galepaw presumed was going to be a smart remark, but the molly shushed him with a drag of her tail over his muzzle. "Talonflight promised to me he won't run his mouth about our agreement to meet so long as he can come along few times too," she admitted about the new warrior, glancing him up and down. "I think he *really* actually likes you, Galepaw."

The brown tabby's hair puffed out at her words, releasing a hitched snarl. "I do not!"

"Awe, how charming," Galepaw teased though his snicker was laced with awkwardness. He didn't know how to talk to her with Talonflight around. What a pest.

"Well, how has your training been?" She questioned, sitting beside Talonflight with her tail curled around her paws.

Galepaw wanted to scoot closer, but he could feel Talonflight staring at him. His glare was more soft than stern, but still Galepaw stuck in place. "Palesnow has been directing us to have more battle training sessions now. Frostpaw always beats me, but I managed to beat Rainpaw and both her siblings last time. That's a good enough win for me," Galepaw explained with a prideful flare, watching the molly intensely for her reaction. "They have their warrior assessments tomorrow though. Soon enough it'll just be me and Frostpaw in the apprentice den for a while."

She gifted him a honey-soaked smile. "That's so cool!"

They would go on to talk about things for what felt like moons. Galepaw would talk about his brother more and tell them about Violetstar's illness. Talonflight threw himself in a few times to explain his friendship with Berrytuft, a warrior just two moons older than him and how she was one of the most skillful climbers he'd ever met. Talonflight always made the meeting shorter when he was there, standing with a yawn and a stretch as his dismissal.

"Well, we best head back. I want to be up bright and early

tomorrow to catch the first set of patrols," Talonflight stated with a brisk dip of his head to Galepaw before he turned away to leave.

As he took a few steps away, she met Galepaw's gaze and her tail danced in a wave goodbye to him. "Same time tomorrow, okay? I want to hear about your friend's' assessments."

"Of course," Galepaw beamed. His next words were delivered quick, then with a little awkward bow of his head. "I'll miss you."

But she appreciated those words every time, and he found himself saying it so much. Now, it was just a little different.

"I miss you."

He was laid before her grave once more, a half-eaten rabbit at his paws and a lily laid at her grave. "I brought you a lily this time. I won't be able to visit you for a while," he started, a smile twitching onto his face. "But next time, I'll be able to *actually* see you. It'll be worth the wait."

Galetooth reached a paw forward to lay it over her grave and the stem of the lily. He thought about his final, bitter goodbye to Rainstar. He hoped one day his friend could forgive him, for if he managed to bring his mate back he would love for them to finally live in ValeClan together. Part of him felt as if Rainstar could never bring herself to even look at him again, but she didn't have to know what his journey consisted of if he returned with her at his side again. He just hoped Rainstar would be happy for him just as she had been for the many moons of their friendship.

The thoughts of what lay ahead of him if he found Ibistide was gut-wrenching, but he was willing to do whatever it took to see her again. If Ibistide's tales were true, he may have to murder a cat, but his love didn't have to know what happened unless needed. He felt terrible lying to her though, his fur prickling not only due to the cold breeze that whisked over him. He sighed and confessed to his possible crimes, an ache settling uncomfortably in his chest.

"My love, I may have to do the unthinkable to bring you back. I will try to make sure I only harm a cold-hearted fleabag who deserves it.

I will do whatever it takes to bring you back though, and I just hope you forgive me in the end. I will fight wars if that's what it takes. I want you back. I want to raise the family we always dreamed of and for you to see how successful our friends are. You would've loved to finally meet Lightpaw and Snowpaw, and I still want you to be able to."

He thought back to the apprentices, a twist of sadness curling about in his stomach. He couldn't help but admit that he regretted leaving, but so many moons of grief couldn't just go away through patrols and watching his brother's daughters grow. They would all grow to have mates and kits. In the end, Galetooth could only bring himself to admire that life with one cat, and bringing her back was the only way to pursue that.

"Galetooth!"

The tom flinched at his name, sitting up and cocking his head over his shoulders to glance back. To his displeasure, Frostspider and Swiftwind emerged from the woods and into the clearing. They had been hot on his trail since he left, their chests heaving with every breath and their pelts ragged. Frostspider appeared relieved to spot Galetooth, his brother bounding forward to stand beside him.

"Stars, I'm so glad you haven't left yet," Frostspider expressed with a grin. Galetooth's gaze moved back to the grave though, his following and his ears dropping. "This is her grave, isn't it?"

Frostspider had never been to the old twolegplace. He knew of Galetooth's meetings with the she-cat but he never tagged along. He would cover for Galetooth's disappearances and tease his brother all the time about his lover. He was supportive even when he was hesitant about it, Swiftwind all the same when Rainstar proposed they involve her deputy as well.

"Why are you two here?" Galetooth huffed, swallowing back a more cruel delivery through a hiss. "Rainstar said if I were to leave, I'd be considered exiled. You can't bring back an exiled cat."

Swiftwind shook his head, standing on Galetooth's other side now. "After a little arguing, Rainstar said we could try to convince you to

stay if we wanted to... And we do." The deputy sighed, nudging Galetooth's shoulder with his nose. "Look, Galetooth, you are one of ValeClan's best warriors. I wanted you to mentor one of my kits for stars sakes. You have a big future ahead of you. I'm sorry she can't be here for that, nothing can change that, but-"

"But something can, and I'm going to find that something," Galetooth growled with a glare to the black and white tom.

Swiftwind knew what Galetooth was referencing in an instant, a more serious shadow dropping onto his visage. Frostspider appeared puzzled though, the tom just reaching out a paw to lay over Galetooth's. The brown and white tom shivered at his brother's reassuring touch, his growl fading as he turned to acknowledge him.

"Swiftwind is right, brother. You could be a leader one day or even just go down in history for how fine of a warrior you are. Aren't stories of you worth dreaming about? That's what every cat is after in the end, outside of love and more," Frostspider spoke up.

"You've tried your convincing *enough.* I'm leaving and that's final," Galetooth stammered, standing and hopping over his former mate's grave to put distance between him and them. A gypsophila crunched under one of his paws, the tom holding his breath at the feeling of the delicate flower under his paw. *Why can't these cats just let me go?!*

Swiftwind stood immediately, stepping forward and careful not to disturb the gravesite. "I don't want you to go and I'm not afraid to use force to prove my point."

Galetooth and Frostspider's eyes both widened at the deputies words, icy and still with his tail lashing behind him. Frostspider was quick to raise his voice to interrupt Swiftwind. "Use force!? If he still wants to go, we just have to let him. We can't fight him to make him stay."

There was something in Swiftwind's eyes the moment Galetooth made eye contact with him that said different to Frostspider's reasoning. Swiftwind knew of the stories and the peril Ibistide's

attempts caused within the clan. Galetooth assumed the deputy thought in that moment that if he were to somehow find Ibistide, he'd bring the failed murder back to the clans and a darkness would wrap it's sharp claws around them all. Galetooth was reluctant to even think about why Swiftwind would presume that of him after praising him - maybe he wasn't a reliant friend after all.

"You don't have to use force. I'm leaving and I'm never coming back," Galetooth stated, his voice monotone as he maintained eye contact with the deputy. "Thank you both for all your help before. May our ancestors guide you well."

Galetooth was apprehensive for a moment as a silence settled between them like a cool, morning fog, anything bound to unknowingly approach from anywhere. Swiftwind's hackles fell and he took a step back, but never did his glaring linger away from the tom. "May they guide you well too," he replied, every word drawn and piercing to Galetooth's ears.

"There's really nothing we can do to convince you, is there?" Frostspider murmured. He then glanced back and forth between Swiftwind and Galetooth, a frown set on his face. "I don't know what you plan to find out there but in my opinion, you can come back whenever you want. Lightpaw and Snowpaw are going to miss you so much...*I* am going to miss you *so much*."

Frostspider's sorrowful words that the white tom nearly choked on made Galetooth's ears fall and delivered a terrible swipe to his heart. He exhaled and carefully maneuvered forward, pressing his muzzle to his brother's. "I will miss you all too. I just need time to find myself. Maybe if Rainstar is okay with it one day I will be back, but for now I belong elsewhere for a while."

He wished he could tell his brother what he was after. Such imposed kit-tales told by an attempted murderer would startle him, but they didn't scare Galetooth. Nothing about the ability to see her again was terrifying, but Frostspider would never understand that if he heard Ibistide's truth behind the tale. In the future if he were to return, maybe his brother would then, but for now Galetooth found himself battling with the fact for a moment that he may *never* see his brother again. Their muzzles drew closer and their brother's

foreheads pressed together as well, settling in one another's' warmth for a moment before Galetooth finally pulled away.

Swiftwind observed from a distance, not even offering Galetooth a dip of his head or wave of his tail. No more words departed from the deputy before he simply turned away to begin his journey back home.

"You find me if you ever need me, 'kay? I helped you break the code once and I'd do it again. Anything for my brother," Frostspider mumbled, smiling at him.

He was shocked his brother didn't argue his departure much just as he had argued with him the other day and many others, but maybe the reality of Galetooth's grief finally hit Frostspider. Galetooth didn't need to let her go, Frostspider needed to let him go, and he had to find that happiness he always preached to him somewhere else.

The brother's turned away from one another, one back to ValeClan and the other out to an unknown stretch outside the territories. One returned to a mate and kits and the other set out with the determination to have all of that again, no matter how stained his trail had to be on the way there.

Galetooth grabbed his prey back and watched Frostspider's tail disappear into the undergrowth. His frown deepened as he thought over his goodbyes, even if they weren't exactly meant to be forever. In the end despite his times of mourning and desolation, he would miss his brother's nagging. He would miss Lightpaw's urge to show off to him and Hollynose's retelling of Galetooth as an apprentice to her. He would miss the feeling of sharing tongues on a border patrol and the thought of having an apprentice. Most of all he would miss Rainstar, a friend he would call no less, but now he didn't know what she preferred to call him.

He would miss it all, but he needed to know if Ibistide's words were true or not. If they were true, he didn't want any of them to bare what he may have to do to bring her back. He was willing to as well, and that was what probably horrified Rainstar and Swiftwind the most with their knowledge of the tales and Galetooth's

eagerness to follow.

He dived into the woods with a final glance back at the grave. He would be back and whether it was with the stories proven true or false, he hoped he'd also resurrect himself at the end of it all.

chapter eight

CLOUDPAW HAD A LONG DAY OF TRAINING WITH SANDNETTLE. The tom was an excellent mentor, patient with Cloudpaw's clumsiness at time and her grogginess when it came to break of dawn training. She had her first patrol earlier with him, Riverfrost, and Stormyheart, the tom teaching her the border and the landmarks of it while they were out. He showed her the Stone Pools, a collection of large stone with little streams dripping through them ending in pools around it all right on the border.

On the way back, Sandnettle insisted Riverfrost and Stormyheart go on without them so they could start some battle training. Cloudpaw learned some simple swipes and pins and though she didn't master them by the end at least Sandnettle's enthusiasm with her improvement was enough for her to wave off her exhaustion then.

Now back in the apprentice den as moonlight shone into the camp, Cloudpaw found the exhaustion battering her right into her nest. She had curled up in her nest before any of the other apprentices settled in for the night. She lay with her chin rested on her paws and tail wrapped snugly around herself. Through all of her attempts though, sleep didn't quite catch a full grasp of her, the apprentice awake enough to hear the others shuffle into the den and settle down. She even at some point heard Oatpaw stand right before her, the tom bending down to sniff her ears as if she ensure she were alive until Mousepaw scolded him to leave her alone.

For what felt like moons of trying to sleep, Cloudpaw even when still feeling the exhaustion numb her limbs and heavy her face, couldn't reach her dreams and everything was a still, sometimes scene-blurred black by her shut eyes. Even as the other apprentices lay to sleep, she was still awake even in the quiet of it all. She grunted under her breath in disapproval, eventually giving in and opening her eyes.

She nearly jumped out of her pelt when her eyes opened to reveal Mudpaw standing right in front of her, the tom bending over in

attempts to match her eye-level. "Cloudpaw?"

"Mudpaw? Were you watching me sleep?" Cloudpaw scoffed at her friend.

The tom shook his head and replied with an awkward chortle. "No, no, on our ancestors I wasn't. I was just trying to see if you were awake."

Cloudpaw's ears twitched and her head ached at his words. She *wished* she was asleep. "Well, I am *wide* awake just to your luck," she snorted. "What's up?"

"I didn't get to train today or even go on any patrols. I spent all day picking Fernstep's ticks because Doebounce would rather spend her day with Nightfang," Mudpaw grumbled in annoyance. "So since you're awake, do you think you'd like to go hunting with me?"

Cloudpaw blinked at her friend, one of her ears falling to the side with her head. "It's late, Mudpaw. Talonstar would lose his mind if he heard we went out without our mentors."

"Hey, it'll be leafbare in a moons time and heavy snow is always unpredictable around here. You've heard the stories about the cruel leafbares, haven't you?" Mudpaw asked, continuing on after he earned a curt nod from Cloudpaw. "If we prove ourselves worthy hunters, we'll be able to hunt and keep cats fed if that ever happens again. Plus, no cat will know. You know we haven't had guards sit out in the clearing since before we were born. If we think camp is that safe at night, outside will be just as safe."

The gray pointed she-cat rolled her eyes and stood to address her friends. "I don't think that logic is very good, but you are *kinda* right. If I get in trouble though, I'm putting all the blame on you."

He grinned. "Deal."

She rolled her eyes and shuffled past him, careful not to awake the other apprentices. Cloudpaw peered over her shoulder to ensure Oatpaw, Mousepaw, and Flickerpaw were still sound asleep as they all were, Oatpaw's very obvious through his obnoxious clamor of

snores. Mudpaw joined here instantly as they padded out of the den, scanning the clearing cautiously.

The clearing of camp was empty, not a pelt of fur or set of eyes in sight. Crickets chirped tunes in the distance, songs rung of stories they witnessed every night for many moons. Crows cawed along with the chorus, flying from branch to branch overhead the camp walls. All that stirred was the usual melodies of the night to which Cloudpaw only ever got to witness from the safety of her den. The excitement of chasing frogs and seeing the stars closer up outside the camp delivered a buzz to her paws, driving her forward in a heartbeat.

She started up the stoney exit with no time to waste, Mudpaw huffing from behind her. "Wait for me!"

She paused on one of the jagged out rocks, the tom jumping up to her side. She bumped him with her shoulder. "This was your plan, wasn't it? Be faster on your paws, slowpoke."

They then went on with the rest of the climb in relative sync with one another, cracking a few jokes quietly enough to where their laughter didn't echo back into the clearing. The two apprentices reached the top and Cloudpaw grinned, throwing herself at Mudpaw and tackling him to the ground. He squeaked in surprise, lying under Cloudpaw's pin with an awkward twist to his face. She drew her face closer to his, lifting a paw to swat his ear.

"They may as well name you Mudturtle," Cloudpaw joked.

Mudpaw blinked, shaking away his flustered expression as Cloudpaw stepped off of him. "Hey, I could probably move faster than some ValeClanners. I'll prove it at the gathering," he argued as he stood to his paws.

"Then how about to start your little mission, you race *me*," Cloudpaw proposed with a lift of her chin and puff out of her chest fur. "Sandnettle says I'm pretty fast on my paws for a CoppiceClanner. We can race to Stone Pools then hunt near there."

"That's fine. I know the woods better than you anyway!" Mudpaw

retorted challengingly.

Part of Cloudpaw regretted the challenge when she remembered how her paws still ached from her training all day then failure to rest, but their daring exit from the camp brought a little more energy to the feline. She lined up beside Mudpaw, tail lashing behind her and as she positioned herself in a slight, ready crouch. The thrill of it all shot adrenaline sturdily through her and at this point Cloudpaw was sure she could stay out running all night.

"Ready... Set..," Cloudpaw started, eyes narrowed and haunches teetering.

"Go!" Mudpaw interrupted, pelting out ahead of her.

"Hey!" Cloudpaw snarled, agitated with her friend's impatience.

She lunged out and after him, paws landing heavily on the forest floor. She didn't know the woods as well as Mudpaw, but she knew she had the agility to at least try and keep up. She barreled through the undergrowth, steering around brambles and stumps from old, fallen trees. Every breath was delivered with a sting through her throat and nostrils as they flared and hitched at times. Cloudpaw didn't care how numb her paws were as she darted along on Mudpaw's trail, the tom's brown tail spotted just ahead of her slinking through the shrubbery.

I have to catch up! I'm not losing this, Cloudpaw thought, attention hooked ahead and eyes slitted.

Cloudpaw hauled herself over a log and used the height to her advantage, kicking her rear paws off the side of it as she sprung forward. She outstretched her front paws to catch herself, her landing aimed right next to Mudpaw's haunches. She didn't notice the little hill ahead though, the difference in her landing surface causing unevenness to her placing. She lost her balance and tumbled forward, yowling out in shock as she rolled through the undergrowth. A few brambles caught her fur before she finally lolled to a stop, lying on her side with her chest rising and falling swiftly.

Mudpaw had skid to a halt and veered around to her aid, the tom's eyes wide and voice frantic. "Cloudpaw! Are you okay?"

She winced as she sat upright slowly, head spinning and the scenery around her blurred for a moment. She blinked rapidly until Mudpaw finally didn't have not one but *two* heads, staring at her friend and breathing out an embarrassed, airy laugh. "Y-yeah I'm okay. Didn't place the landing right, that's all."

"You could've seriously hurt yourself, dung-head," Mudpaw snorted, leaning forward to brush himself against her side in attempts to support her as she stood. She didn't need the support, but she appreciated it nonetheless from her worried friend. "I don't think beating me is *that* serious."

"You're the one who cheated!" She growled, lifting a paw to bat him on the shoulder. "Now we're not even close to the Stone Pools and it's all your fault!"

Cloudpaw meant it all jokingly, but Mudpaw was quick to pull away and flash her a venomous glare. He didn't take to anything lightly when already agitated - especially if blame was sitting heavily on his own shoulders. "My fault? You're the one who took a tumble," he hissed in reply.

The molly shied away from him at his hiss, reluctant to fight with her friend. She had already witnessed him, Oatpaw, and Flickerpaw bicker plenty of times, and Mudpaw wasn't afraid to clash back with insults and arrogance. "I'm sorry I-"

There was a shuffle in the woods ahead that cut Cloudpaw off. They both alerted towards the noise, ears pointed forward and fur bristled. There was a strange, new scent that washed over them as a breeze flit their way from where the noise came from. Mudpaw was already arching his back, a growl growing in his throat whilst Cloudpaw's gaze latched to the twitching bushes, her breathing still rapid and heavy.

She felt the urge to call out in case it was one of her clanmates, but when the bushes started to *snarl,* she knew all too well that wasn't the case. Piercing, yellow eyes shot through the green leaves from

where the noise emerged. A long, narrow snout started out first, the eyes of the creature now fully visible. Its size compared to the two apprentices was unmatched as it revealed its full body, Cloudpaw's heart drumming in panic. Its brown and gray fur was rough and disheveled, its ribs visible in its thinner appearance. The creature looked as if it hadn't tasted prey in moons, its tongue drawing hungrily over its lips as it folded them over in a menacing snarl.

What didn't help was Cloudpaw's bleeding scrapes to her forelegs from her tumble and run in with a few brambles. Its eyes stared her down as if she were nothing but a feeble mouse ready for the wrath of its jaws. For the first time ever, Cloudpaw knew what it felt like to be prey.

Before the creature could lunge for her, Mudpaw pounced at the larger animal. He bit and clung onto its shoulder, the predator howling out and flailing for a moment. It shook Mudpaw off of it and lunged forward to stand over the fallen tom, eyes glowing with hunger.

Cloudpaw exhaled and with numb, aching paws she threw herself forward, using what little tactics she knew to assist her friend. With unsheathed paws, she swiped right from the creatures face. Her claws hooked through its skin and for the first time Cloudpaw witnessed blood spill onto her paws, adding crimson to her gray and white fur. The creature growled and whirled around for her instead, jaws snapping with its teeth clanging together grotesquely. With little ideas of what to do next and terror in the form of putrid, yellow fangs coming towards her, she did what she knew best and turned around to flee.

Pain soared through her though as the creature caught her the middle of her tail. Her claws scored through the dirt beneath her as she was hauled backwards, rear legs flailing as she cried out desperately for an escape. She could feel the creature's teeth sink into the flesh of her tail, numbing her use of it with an electrifying sting of pain shooting up her body. Cloudpaw felt her tail snap and twist as she tried to pull away and for a moment she really believed she was going to die, eyes wide as she tasted a sour bile rise in her throat from the panic.

A shriek echoed out from behind her and the creature's grip disappeared. She glanced behind her to spot Mudpaw throwing himself right at the creature's face, scratching and hissing frenetically. "Get away from her!" He cried out, biting down into the side of the animal's neck to keep fighting.

Cloudpaw could only watch in horror as everything happened so fast. Mudpaw stumbled free of his grip and the creature whipped around, jaws sinking into the skin between his shoulders. Her eyes stretched out to fit the full moon as the creature then began to shook its head swiftly, Mudpaw only able to cry and wiggle pathetically in its grasp. Anger fueled through the feline as she watched her friend be thrown around, the she-cat lunging forward to help.

Only then did she glance down and notice the last half of her tail lying in a pool of blood. The sight captured her attention so fully that she didn't notice the creature throw Mudpaw out of its grasp and raise a paw defensive against her. Its claws tore through her skin from her cheek down her neck as she last minute tried to swerve away, blood splashing out onto the ground and slipping messily down her face. She puled in pain, stumbling backwards and wincing repeatedly in reaction to the stinging.

Mudpaw lay a few tail-lengths away to the side, unmoving as he sprawled with a severe bite wound tearing out some of his fur. Cloudpaw stared between her friend and the approaching, snarling creature in horror, but she puffed out her fur and arched her back to keep her stance. She was ready to die if it meant protecting her friend. No regrets.

That was until two shadows pounced out of the woods from behind her and relief flooded over the she-cat. A blur of sandy fur reared up and lashed its claws right over the creatures face, earning a pained yowl. Another pelt of brown and white followed, only hissing and spitting at the creature as it stood protectively in front of Cloudpaw.

Sandnettle and Oatpaw! Cloudpaw thought, an agonized smile breaching her face at their rescue.

Oatpaw was just as unaware of fighting as she was but with a quick glance to check back on Cloudpaw he then lunged forward to assist her mentor. Sandnettle and Oatpaw worked together to deliver continuous blows to the now bleeding creature, dodging snaps of its jaws and panicked swipes of its paws. They managed to scare the thin, starved creature back into the woods, both of the toms panting and exhausted with their efforts. Sandnettle then steered around and ran to Mudpaw's side, the tom dropping down to his side and nudging him.

"You're lucky I noticed you both were gone!" Cloudpaw was attentively watching Mudpaw as Sandnettle spoke softly to the limp apprentice, unmoved by her brother's austere growling. "You could've died, Cloudpaw!"

Her ears were ringing and she could barely understand him. *Please be alive. Please.* She found herself pleading as she watched intensely, blood touching the corners of her muzzle and her limbs tremulous with every breath.

"Don't let our prophecy get to your head!" Oatpaw's demanding hiss came off more like a warning than an order in that moment, but then Mudpaw coughed and twitched and Cloudpaw rushed forward to him.

"Mudpaw!" She cried out, desperate to reach her friend. She found herself nearly stumbling over her own paws though, Oatpaw rushing forward to be at her side and assist her as she nearly rolled over.

"He's alive but in critical condition," Sandnettle informed, keeping his cool as his gaze scanned between the injured apprentices. There was a stern twist to his muzzle at the situation but he leaned down to speak calmly to the brown tom. "Are you good to try to stand?"

Mudpaw exhaled in a pained rasp. "E-everything hurts... So bad. Please help."

He was trembling and whether it was in overwhelming affliction or terror none of them knew, but Sandnettle gave up his attempts to ask for him to stand and turned to order Oatpaw. "I need you to run

back to camp as fast as you can and get help. We'll need cats ready to help and some to meet us on the way back."

Oatpaw nodded and took one last glance to Cloudpaw, his eyes narrowed but still a worried gloss overcame them. He whisked past his sister and back to camp, the cool breeze of his passing chilling her open wound and making her shiver.

Sandnettle grabbed Mudpaw by his scruff and raised the larger apprentice as much as he could, his rear legs and tail still sliding against the ground. After a few fox-lengths of movement Mudpaw cried out for him to stop so Sandnettle did, resting the tom down and gaze sliding over him worriedly.

"Is he going to be okay!?" Cloudpaw blurted out worriedly, stepping out to follow them.

Sandnettle stayed silent as if searching for an answer for a moment. Cloudpaw waited but he never gave one, grabbing Mudpaw by his scruff again once the tom took a few breaths and prepared himself.

She stared back at the other half of her tail back at their battlegrounds, blood painted around it and Mudpaw's fur speckled around in the grass. Her heartbeat drummed through her ears and she followed after the two of them, Mudpaw's eyes repeatedly blinking harshly and tormented groans escaping the tom with every movement. Her ears fell at the state of him and her stomach twisted uneasily.

If she couldn't save her friend, how could she save her clan? Perhaps she wasn't special as she now stood a failed, half-tailed molly nothing but a speck of fur to her observant ancestors above her. Cloudpaw wasn't prophesied; she couldn't be.

It was nothing but a kit-tale.

chapter nine

THUNDER CRACKLED OVERHEAD AND LIGHTNING LIT UP THE NIGHT SKY, moonlight blinked out by storm clouds and heavy rain. Gusts of wind roared through the other side of the valleys, all of the storm's torture beating down on the brown and white tom that traversed the new lands to him. His paws felt as if they could melt into the ground with the pools of mud that began to form underneath him, dirtying his fur and crawling in between his pads. Every step felt heavy as his pelt was soaked with the rain, the tom having to squint as he voyaged through the ravenous storm. It had been moons since he ever had to even witness and walk through this prodigious of a storm and now he was out of sight from any cover and somewhere he had never been before.

There were dark, tall shapes in the distance he could barely pick out through the rain. His attention was hooked forward and he marched on, praying that the sighting from promising of shelter. It was already dangerous enough to be traveling at night, but the unexpected storm only made it worse. First Frostspider and Swiftwind's interference and now this. It was as if the ancestors were clawing at him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. Her life was on the line.

Galetooth knew this had to be one of the last storms of leaf-fall before leafbare bared its ugly teeth. It was still cold in the rain and chilled stare of the night sky though, the tom shivering as he continued forward. If he didn't find shelter soon he'd presumably be nothing but a pound of wet flesh found to some predator in the morning. He couldn't die though, he had a mission to fulfill, so every breath hissed through his clenched, chattering fangs as he sauntered on.

The earth eventually became less muddy but more cold and wet. The smell mixed with the rain burned his nostrils and made them flare in disgust. It only worsened when the earth beneath him began to rattle as if it planned to open its jaws beneath him and swallow

him whole. He caught his breath and stared down at his paws right at a flash of lightning, noticing how black and unusual the surface was beneath him. Then a clamor or roars pounded through his ears and he swiveled his head to the right, eyes wide at the approaching beast.

Its eyes were round and bright, staring right into his and making him freeze up in the moment. It smelled like smoke and blood as it shrieked down the unfamiliar path and right towards him. The beast had no urgency to stop at his presence as it charged forward, eyes hungry as it bellowed out.

Galetooth blinked and seemingly last minute he barreled out of the way. He could feel the beast's teeth graze the tip of his tail as its swift pass whisked a chilling wind over him. He couldn't find his footing as he dodged and found himself just rolling into an even ditch in the earth and right into a collection of mud. He groaned as rain continued to beat down on him torturously, sinking the mud further into his fur as he shakily stood out of it.

This storm couldn't have picked any other day? He complained in his head, shaking his pelt out to his best ability but nearly tumbling over to the side again. An agitated rasp of a growl emerged from him as he hauled himself up the side of the ditch and back on his trail towards the shadows. At least now he knew if the earth stood black and tremulous it was time to run, but that information would've been far more useful to know before.

He winced as he reached the leveled earth out of the ditch. The towered shadows had grown closer, some lit up and others still standing dark. The scenery clicked in his head and he growled underneath his breath. "Great, a nest of twolegs. Just what I needed."

Galetooth painfully ambled on regardless though, careful when he passed on more tinier paths the beast had ran along before. The tom hoped shelter would make its entrance soon for the rain didn't seem as if it wanted to slow down. Another crackle of thunder erupted and he nearly jumped out of his pelt, frightened it might've been another beast.

"Hey! You!"

He could barely hear the voice through the storm but he managed to catch it, ears perking and twitching around in an instant. The voice called again and he glanced over to his side and towards a twoleg nest. The nest was lit up from the inside enough that the wooded cliff of it was visible, an unfamiliar cat posted on it. The cliff was safe from the rain due to the other cliff overhead of it supported by pillars between them. She was dry and Galetooth had to squint even harder to see more of her but she was cleaner than any forest cat he had ever seen, her long black and white fur almost glistening through the rain.

"Come here!"

Galetooth was hesitant to approach a stranger - a kittypet at that - but it also meant shelter out of the storm. He hastened his pace and padded over to the cliff, trudging up a flight of thin logs to get out of the rain. Being out of the rain and only in the still, cold atmosphere of the storm made him shiver, but at least his damp fur could now eventually dry.

"What are you doing out here in such a storm?" The kittypet started as she glanced him up and down, her voice well-spoken and soft. Her muzzle twitched and she looked a little taken aback. "You aren't from around here, are you? It may be the rain but you smell like nothing but grass and fish."

Galetooth would've taken more offense to that comment if she wasn't a kittypet, which he concluded by the closer appearance of her. Her fur was well-groomed and a collar shimmered from under her neck fur, green with a silver ball that made an odd ring with every movement from her. She smelled like nothing familiar to him but it wasn't rancid either.

"I'm not. I'm just passing through here," he replied. "I didn't expect the storm."

"Well thank heavens I happened to be here, hm?" She chortled, only earning a confused look from Galetooth. "My humans are all cozy inside. I like to stand out here on the porch and watch the rain."

Galetooth was puzzled by her language. Heavens? Humans? Porch? It was all such strange wording but he tried to piece together what she meant in his head. His confusion was obvious to the kittypet though, the molly not afraid to bring attention to it.

"You're a feral cat, aren't you?"

Galetooth's shoulder fur bristled at her wording. That he took light offense to. Feral? That's what ValeClan would call wolves and other rabid predators. "I'm not *feral,* I'm a clan cat," he corrected slowly in attempt to be polite.

She blinked then dipped her head. "Apologies, that's what us house cats usually call you." She then stepped a little closer to him, ears pointed forward as Galetooth shied away from her closeness. "So what's your name, *clan cat?"*

"Galetooth," the tom retorted. "You?"

"Gale...Tooth?" She repeated, putting a long pause in between his name. "You uh, clan cats, have interesting names, but I think it's rather cool. Unique. My name is Jasmine."

"Likewise," Galetooth mumbled in reference to her comment about his name.

Jasmine sat before him, licked a paw, and drew it over her ear before she spoke again. "Since you're a clan cat then, why really are you all the way out here? It's been a long while since I've heard about clan cats traveling through here."

Galetooth was quick to note her words. She didn't say she *never* had heard of clan cats wandering through. Perhaps this kittypet was more useful for information rather than just shelter to the night. Plus, admittedly, Galetooth missed a twinge of conversation to get him through the day. Being alone with his thoughts wasn't the greatest.

"I'm searching for a friend," Galetooth half-lied. "Have you seen another clan cat around here?"

Jasmine looked reluctant to answer, turning away and beckoning

him with her tail. "Come inside. I promise my humans won't see you and when they wake, I'll be sure you're gone before they spot you. You'll be warmer in here."

Fireflower's old tales were right about kittypets being way too friendly, Galetooth reminisced. He was hesitant to follow her so he watched for a moment as she approached an odd, tall square of wood. There was a strange, see through box at the bottom of it, Jasmine batting it with a paw as if to showcase it to him first. The opening of the box swung to and fro, open enough for Jasmine to slip into the twoleg home and disappear.

Galetooth padded forward and sniffed at the odd entrance. They never had dens that appeared translucent and had openings that had to be swatted open. He slowly reached a paw to the peculiar door, holding his breath as the door lifted to allow his paw inside as it pressed through. He could immediately feel the warmth on the other side, breathing out in relief and instantly proceeding with the rest of his body.

He stepped inside cautiously but was delighted with the comforting escape from the cold. His paws tracked spots of mud onto the wood floor of the twoleg home, shining in colors and patterns he had never seen on trees before. There were odd hills of color and placements of odd-colored grass around the den. It reeked of nothing but twoleg and other eccentric smells, his muzzle twitching and scrunching up in a discombobulated reaction to it all. Galetooth never felt so out of place before, even with his grief whilst being back in ValeClan, but at least he knew this was only a kittypet's offer for a temporary shelter. He was here only to be safe from the storm for the night.

Jasmine beckoned him over to one of the strange stretches of grass. He carefully stepped over and the minute his paws reached the grass he was stunned. The grass was soft - it didn't crunch under his paws or prickle at them, but instead offered a delicate touch. Jasmine purred as she watched his reaction as he stood on it, the she-cat lying with her paws tucked under her chest on the surface.

"This is what the humans call a rug. It's one of my favorite spots," Jasmine explained. "Nothing like grass and leaves, hmm?"

Galetooth shook his head, kneading at the surface with his paws in astonishment. "Nothing at all."

"Rest, my friend, it's been a long time since I've had company," Jasmine soothed in a charismatic, charming voice. She was a little too friendly, but Galetooth wasn't reluctant to the company for the night. "I see my neighbors during the day but Frizz has grown old and grumpy, he's usually inside most times now. Kite... Well, I haven't seen Kite in moons. He's..." her gaze narrowed and her voice dropped an octave,"...Been gone for a few moons now."

"What do you mean by that?" Galetooth asked in a whisper, his head swiveling around to ensure the coast was clear of twolegs as he spoke.

She directed him with a flick of her tail to settle, to which Galetooth followed her gentle demand instantly. He copied her relaxed posture and maintained a steady glance over the molly, impatiently waiting her answer. Jasmine knew the area and its inhabitants way better than he ever could, which means she could at least know stories of Ibistide's travels at the least.

"There could be no cats more feral than this band of cats that travels these areas," Jasmine started, a more solemn tone to the feline's once soft-spoken words. "They reside more on the farther, more abandoned part of town, but every once in a while I've spotted them around here. They are cruel and mean. I've seen them try to rip Frizz's pelt off one time he was wandering out of his home. I'd really hope they aren't the reason Kite is gone... He is a young tom. He's new around here and such a friendly soul. I'd hate for those cats to get ahold of him."

Galetooth's curiosity grew. "What would some rogues want to do with a kittypet?"

Jasmine surprisingly didn't tilt her head at his wording but only shook it and sighed. "They've taken them from their homes and killed them. Before Kite, his humans had another kittypet named Sarah. She was a good friend of mine. When she disappeared, word got out that other house cats and strays saw those cats kill her cold-heartedly one day. They are sick murderers with no care. If they

really did get Kite, I'd hate to hear about it. They're the reason Frizz and I don't wander much since their group grew and lingered to our parts of town. We tried to tell him all the same, but he is nothing but an adventurous kit."

"Believe it or not too, the rag-tag group gave themselves a name. A name!? Can you imagine? I know you clan cats have names but I've heard word of your laws. These fellas, they have no laws. No morals," she continued on with a low growl lining her story. Galetooth listened with wide eyes but turned to groom himself. In the end, Jasmine's story was just some insane plotted kittypet tale and not the clan cat part he was interested in, but he didn't mind the story-telling nonetheless. "They call themselves the *Dark Matter*. It's like they know how evil they are and just soak it all in. Us house cats see a cat run around with a torn up pelt and dark, lingering stares and we know to keep indoors. They call us kibble-cats and so-called kittypets for a reason, and I'm glad to say that keeps me safe from them being one."

Galetooth caught some mud on his tongue whilst grooming his shoulder and flinched away in disgust. He then hurriedly blinked back to Jasmine who had been staring at him after finishing her rambling, the tom passing her an awkward smile. "Yeah, this place does seem safe. Even back at the clan I have to be weary of predators. Clan life is never safe."

His words tasted sour on the tip of his tongue with how right they were. If clan life was safe, she'd still be alive, and he knew that all too well. He wouldn't be cooped up in some random kittypet's den taking shelter while on the search for a cat exiled moons before his birth. In the end, *his* story was the crazy one.

"My bad, I didn't mean to talk your ears off," she apologized with an airy chuckle. "With little company and so many troubles, I guess I've just had no other ears to talk to it all about."

"I don't mind," Galetooth reassured, unfolding his paws to lay them up and rest his chin on them. "I'd be troubled too if cats were running around killing innocent other cats. Sounds like a pawful."

She nodded and a silence rested between the two of them for a

minute. Galetooth found his eyes beginning to shut even as Jasmine once again broke the stillness. "Say, who is your friend you're looking for? You said they're a clan cat too?"

"Yeah, uh..." Galetooth trailed off. He wasn't sure how to go about telling Jasmine who he was looking and why, but he needed a lead for his journeys ahead. "He's an older tom cat. He left the clan many moons ago but I've come looking for him."

Jasmine squinted at him. "Who's this tom cat?"

"His names Ibistide," Galetooth stated. "He's black and white and-"

"Yellow eyes with a scar over the right one," Jasmine finished for him, his gaze shooting over to her to catch her expression dropping and tail lashing behind her. She described him *just as the stories did.*

Galetooth's eyes could fit the full moons and all of its surrounding stars. There was a hopeful flare that thrashed his heart against his chest. "You know him?"

"Know him? No. I'd be dead before I could even introduce myself," Jasmine scoffed. "Heard of him is the correct wording."

All Galetooth needed to know was that he was alive and out there. There was an exhilaration that could run him through the valley for moons straight if he wanted to. He still was perplexed and curious of Jasmine's statements though, further questioning the molly. "What have you heard about him?"

Her answer - well, he was disappointed he couldn't answer it himself. After all, he was after an exiled, attempted murderer who proposed he could revive the dead.

"He's the reason the Dark Matter exists, my friend. He's their *leader.*"

chapter ten

THE MOST EVENTFUL TIME FOR COPPICECLAN OUTSIDE OF CEREMONIES WAS THE GATHERING. Further down the border past the Stone Pools was a stream Oatpaw had only heard stories of so far, an old twoleg bridge connecting both of the clan territories of it. It served as a pivotal piece of their history as it was the same bridge their founders fought their first war on; the war where Coppicestar and Valestar fought one another till they both perished and their deputies, Hailstep and Redwillow, came to an agreement of long-term peace within the clans. Oatpaw sometimes couldn't believe their clans were still named after such leaders who caused extreme turmoil for many moons, but regardless they were the founders, and sometimes there was distant whispers and rumors of Coppicestar and Valestar's real truth behind their war.

So the gathering meant a time of utter peace even in times of havoc. CoppiceClan hadn't had even a border skirmish with ValeClan since moons before he was born, so the peace was at a standstill high. Oatpaw's clanmates enjoyed conversation with their slimmer, faster neighbors, some of them even remaining good friends through every moon and every gathering. It was still against the code to take on a mate from the other clan, but friendships could never and would never be.

Talonstar was standing near the exit of camp, Berrytuft shockingly not at his side. Oatpaw knew all too well why as she was close to her kitting time, the word finally getting around camp as the she-cat found herself visiting the Starlinked far more. She instead observed from outside the Starlinked den, Gorsefeather and Daisyspring who also insisted they not go at her side. Oatpaw was estranged by his mother's willingness to not go as she had just returned back to her warrior duties, but his mother insisted she stay behind to watch over Minnowshine and Berrytuft.

"Webtail, Willowmist, Flickerwing, Flamedance, Oatpaw, Mousepaw, Nightfang, Doebounce, Sandnettle, Honeyshine,

Stormyheart, Rockfoot, and Patchsight are my selected group for the gathering. Any not called are expected to be worthy guards for the camp until our return," Talonstar announced, Oatpaw beaming at his name.

Cloudpaw and Mudpaw's names were excluded though, the tom scanning his gaze over to his sister and her friend. The two of them sat with Viperleap, the tabby warrior comforting her irritated son. Cloudpaw, now half-tailed with a long, still relatively fresh scar scored from her cheek and down her neck, sat with her head bowed in disappointment. Oatpaw was empathetic for his sister's punishment as directed by Sandnettle and Doebounce and he hoped Talonstar would drag her out of it, but their father didn't.

Part of him was still enraged by Cloudpaw's daring journey with Mudpaw though that nearly got them both killed. Why would she ever do such a thing? Did she think she was untouchable? *Invincible?* He knew it was just because Mudpaw was too adventurous of a friend for her own good, but Oatpaw couldn't get the vision and Mousepaw's words out of his head.

"One of you is destined to die horribly in that fight."

The burden of knowing one of them even through all their greatness would be nothing but a story was suffocating. Torturous at that.

"You ready for your first gathering?"

Willowmist's soft voice snapped him out of his thoughts and nearly frightened him. His mentor had stepped to his side, a purr rumbling in her throat. Oatpaw granted her a warm smile in return.

"I am!" He enthralled.

Mousepaw padded up to Oatpaw's other side, excitement curled onto her face. "I can't wait to see and talk to the other Starlinked again. Watermoss is my favorite. He's the youngest of them and he actually has a sense of humor."

"I bet his jokes are better than yours," Oatpaw teased, earning a swat to the ear from his friend.

Talonstar began to lead the group up the exit and outside the camp. Oatpaw followed near the rear of the group, Mousepaw and Willowmist right at his side. His paws tingled with excitement as he exited the camp, forgetting all about his worries of the prophecy and his sister. The gathering was a moment of relaxation and serenity after all, he had other days to fret, and their destiny still settled far down their trail - for now.

The full moon brightened the night sky above them, stars twinkling through the branches overhead. Never had the forest in the depths of night looked so light, their path ahead visible without having to squint. Moonlight shined down on their pelts and guided them forward, a true gift from their ancestors themselves. Crickets sang a more low, melodious tune and the wings of crows beat from tree to tree. It was an enchanting look to the forest under such starlight that made Oatpaw think that the scenery must be parallel to how the ancestor's lands looked all the time.

Oatpaw had been to the border only once on a tour Willowmist gave him. She showed him the Stone Pools in more. It was a rather tedious trip with a lot of talking from his mentor, but at least she was well-spoken and grabbed his attention back every time it lingered off. Being near the border again still felt new, the CoppiceClan scents now mixed with those of ValeClan. ValeClan had what Willowmist described as a more fish-like scent to them, for they learned to swim and hunt fish in the rivers and ponds of their valleys. Oatpaw wished he could learn to do that someday, but CoppiceClan shivered at the idea of swimming - admittedly, he did as well.

"I want you to return everything you hear back to your sister when she's awake tomorrow," Willowmist instructed. "I feel bad she couldn't come to her first one. Sandnettle was just as adventurous and stubborn as she and Mudpaw are, but I suppose he isn't doing wrong as a mentor to prove his point."

"I think they learned a lesson enough through what happened out there," Mousepaw snorted with a sideways glare to the molly. "Mudpaw nearly *died.* He was just able to return to training yesterday since his dizziness and headaches finally went away. I don't think they should've been left out like this."

Mousepaw had a point and Willowmist knew that all too well, not arguing back with her brother's daughter. There was a tense silence that lingered between the three of them until Flickerwing sauntered right in between them, nearly running into Oatpaw.

"I'll have to introduce you to Lightpaw and Snowpaw!" Flickerwing started to Oatpaw. "They are going to *love* you!"

Flickerwing's excitement was a little *too* overwhelming from Oatpaw, the tom blinking away from his practically spat words. "Uh, okay."

The group slowed to forewarn their arrival. Oatpaw glanced ahead in an instant, spotted the bridge he had only heard stories of until now. A silver molly was already perched on the railing of which he assumed was Rainstar, all her Starlinked and deputy behind her on the base of the structure. Talonstar was quick to start CoppiceClan into the area, the tom hopping onto the bridge with Crowbite right behind him.

"I get the best view," Mousepaw gloated as Crowbite beckoned to her from the bridge, Oatpaw huffing at his friend. "Best of luck, Oatpaw!"

He watched in envy as his friend got to stand on the bridge and chat with the other Starlinked. Talonstar had already leaped onto rail of the bridge a few tail-lengths away from Rainstar, granting the other leader a friendly dip of his head. Rainstar didn't return it and instead looked out into the crowd, eyes narrowed. *She doesn't seem so nice,* Oatpaw observed.

"Come with me!" Flickerwing enjoined with a glance over his shoulder back at Oatpaw.

Oatpaw was hesitant and Willowmist was keen to notice from beside him. She leaned down to nudge his shoulder gently. "Go on and have fun. I'll make sure to find you when it's over."

Oatpaw was glad to have Willowmist's encouragement. She was a very knowledgeable mentor, direct with her training and not hard on him at all. She didn't snap when he failed even if it was

continuously, instead she took almost a motherly approach to everything when it came to their sessions. It was no wonder Stormyheart grew into such a strong, kind-hearted warrior since his mother was astounding and almost star-lit in Oatpaw's eyes. He was lucky to have her as a mentor.

He bounded after Flickerwing, remaining on the ginger tom's tail as he led them towards the stream. Oatpaw thrashed backwards when the water met his front paws, bewildered by the cold, strange feeling that now dampened his fur. Flickerwing whirled around to chuckle at him. "It's just water! C'mon!"

Oatpaw inhaled sharply and stepped back into the stream, wincing at the cold touch. He could feel the silt from under the stream itch between his paw pads and curl into his fur, though the water went no higher than his paws. It was no wonder CoppiceClanner's didn't want to swim as the cool feeling of the water just as his paws was enough to make him shiver. He weaved through the crowd after his clanmate, cats glancing sideways at him with some of their stares lingering for a lot longer than he'd like. His pelt puffed out against the cold air and he nearly slammed into Flickerwing when the tom came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the crowd.

"Lightpaw! Snowpaw!" Flickerwing purred. Oatpaw shuffled to the tom's side to spot the white she-cat and the orange one who beamed at Flickerwing's arrival.

"Flickerpaw!" The ginger she-cat chirped.

"It's actually *Flickerwing* now," he corrected with a prideful swell of his chest. Flickerwing then gestured to Oatpaw with his tail, the apprentice tensing up awkwardly under their followed stares. "This is Oatpaw! He's one of our new apprentices and the future of our clan!"

You did not have to say that, Oatpaw thought bitterly at Flickerwing's mention of the prophecy, but Lightpaw and Snowpaw didn't seem to catch what he meant with his wording at least.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Lightpaw," the ginger tabby replied and then nodded to her sister. "This is Snowpaw."

"It'd be a case of bad naming if your name was Snowpaw. I've never heard of orange snow," Oatpaw attempted to joke with an airy chortle. Luckily, it managed to earn a giggle from Lightpaw and he beamed at his success.

"We also have new apprentices!" Snowpaw boasted, side-stepping to reveal three, smaller cats talking amongst themselves. "This is Ripplepaw, Applepaw, and Morningpaw!"

The three new apprentices turned with different reactions to Snowpaw's interruption of their mumbling. Morningpaw was a black and white she-cat, the apprentice gifting them the most enthusiastic, toothiest grin Oatpaw could've sworn he'd ever seen. Applepaw was an orange and white tom with a more shy appeal, cowering back a little behind the largest of the siblings. The largest was Ripplepaw, a black and orange patched molly with dark yellow eyes Oatpaw felt burn right through him as she glared their way.

"Better remember my name. I'll be one the greatest warriors they'll ever go on to talk about," Ripplepaw stated almost monotonously, to which Oatpaw couldn't tell if she was being serious or not. Regardless, he stored her name away for safe-keeping just in case she was being serious.

"She got Frostspider as her mentor and it just makes her cocky," her sister, Morningpaw, pointed out, Ripplepaw shooting her a cold look.

Snowpaw shook her head at the new apprentices and swiveled around to acknowledge Flickerwing and Oatpaw again. "Where's Mudpaw?" She asked curiously.

Oatpaw didn't want to think about Mudpaw and Flickerwing laughed uncomfortably at the question. "Well-"

"Cats of CoppiceClan and ValeClan!"

Talonstar's booming voice shot over the clearing and earned Oatpaw's attention in an instead. His father stood elegantly on the perch of the bridge, amber eyes glowing in the moonlight as his gaze soared over the crowd. His large, muscular presence was show-

stopping, as proven by the crowd silencing against his demand and focusing on the tom intensely. Oatpaw sat in between Flickerwing and Lightpaw and felt his heart race on with pride as he watched his father begin the gathering.

"That's my dad," Oatpaw felt the need to whisper to Lightpaw, who snorted in amusement at him.

At least in the end he knew, Cloudpaw would be a whole lot *more* awkward than him. Too bad she wasn't there to prove his point.

"Welcome to gathering to those old and new to the tradition," Talonstar started with a bow of his head to the crowd. "This is a time of nothing but peace and celebration between our clans. We ask that you all take time to meet some other cats even at the end of our speaking today until we dismiss you."

With a glance to a still quiet, still Rainstar, Talonstar took a breath and began again. "I propose that I go first today." Rainstar didn't look his way or shake her head in disapproval, so Talonstar continued on. "We have a new warrior within our ranks! Flickerwing! We also have two new apprentices - my *own* kits if I do say myself - Oatpaw and Cloudpaw!"

"Flickerwing! Oatpaw! Cloudpaw!"

As their names were cheered by both clans, Oatpaw lifted his chin and shut his eyes to soak in it all. It felt good to have both clans honor his growth into an apprentice. When his eyes opened, he caught a stone-faced Rainstar staring directly at him. He felt a shiver crawl down his spine at the ValeClan leader's hooked focus on him before she finally glanced down to her paws instead.

He had heard not so much about Rainstar outside of her being just as new to leading as Talonstar. They became leaders relatively close in time and never appeared to have neither a friendly nor unfriendly approach to one another. All Oatpaw knew otherwise about the leader is that she had no kits and became deputy after Bearbelly died under the decision of the Starlinked instead as Violetstar was too ill to make it herself.

"She hasn't been herself since Galetooth left," Lightpaw mumbled, her ears dropping and a frown drawn onto her face.

Oatpaw parted his jaws to question the apprentice's note but then Talonstar began to speak again. "Berrytuft is absent due to her being close to her kitting time. After her kits are weaned, Riverfrost has volunteered to help care for his kits till their apprentices so she can return to her position as deputy." He paused for a moment and turned his full attention to Rainstar once more. "CoppiceClan would also like to warn ValeClan. We had a coyote attack our apprentices the other night. We suppose there may be more of them wandering and hunting before the full arrival of leafbare."

"ValeClan thanks you." Rainstar's words were emotionless outside of a bitterness weaved between them. She ignored Talonstar's confused glare and stood to begin addressing the gathering herself. "Hunting has been promising for ValeClan. Batsight has moved to the nursery and has birthed Haresnap's kits, Rowankit and Smokekit. We also have three new apprentices being Ripplepaw, Morningpaw, and Applepaw!"

She was quick with her words and also to dismiss the cheering of the new apprentices name with a flick of her tail. "ValeClan will be dismissing ourselves immediately though." She still strayed from Talonstar's stares as she paused, finally turning to meet his gaze as she spoke again. "With leafbare approaching, we must rest well for plenty more hunting."

Neither of the leaders said goodbye to one another. There was an odd tension that thickened the air between them and made Oatpaw hold his breath. He never heard of Talonstar and Rainstar having quarrels with one another, but now every stare appeared personal and menacing. It was peculiar enough that Rainstar was insisting on ValeClan already leaving, though her conclusion on leafbare and hunting wasn't necessarily an excuse Oatpaw thought. He watched as the silver molly beckoned her deputy and Starlinked to follow and she leaped into the crowd to gather her clan.

"What's wrong with your leader? Wake up on the wrong side of the nest?" Flickerwing questioned with a twitch of his ear.

Lightpaw sighed and shook her head. "Father tells me she was in love with this warrior of ours who ran away. No cat knows why he ran away either, but there's word that Rainstar knows and keeps it to herself." She ducked her head and mumbled the next part sadly. "I wish he didn't run away..."

"It's okay though, my dad is deputy and he always make sure he keeps Rainstar and the clan happy no matter her grumpiness," Ripplepaw cut in to boast, Oatpaw trying his hardest not to grumble at the irritating she-cat.

There was a call of the apprentices' names as ValeClan cats were beginning to peel away out of the clearing. Snowpaw nudged her sister to follow but Lightpaw didn't break without a friendly nod of her head to Oatpaw and Flickerwing. "See you both next time, okay? Safe travels!"

She's very nice, Oatpaw thought about his new - and first - ValeClan friend. *Wonder why her clan has so much drama though. Warriors running away? Grumpy leader? No thanks.*

But in the end, at least their clan wasn't relying on two apprentices prophesied by their Starlinked. Two cats following a destiny to safe a clan. Two cats that would become one. The reawakening thought of Crowbite's vision made Oatpaw's stomach churn nervously. He wished the gathering wasn't so short.

Talonstar watched ValeClan begin to slink away through narrowed eyes, tail lashing behind him. "I suppose we'll head home too," he called out to CoppiceClan, but never did his gaze stray from the other clan as they departed.

"What in the ancestor's names is going on between your dad and Rainstar?" Flickerwing whispered to him.

Oatpaw blinked, gaze still latched to his father. "I don't know. I think Rainstar's just being rude, really."

Flickerwing shrugged and turned away from Oatpaw as Flamedance, the new warrior's mother, stepped over to him. Willowmist then appeared through the crowd, purring as her eyes

settled on Oatpaw. She padded up to her apprentice with Stormyheart and Webtail right on her trail.

"You down for some hunting with Stormyheart and I tomorrow?" Willowmist asked with a gesture towards her son.

Oatpaw smiled at Stormyheart who shyly exchanged one back. He was a phenomenal warrior but very timid, usually preferring to spend time either alone or mostly mute when around others. "I'd love to!" Oatpaw answered.

"Good, and maybe your next gathering won't be so disappointing," Willowmist half-sneered, shaking her head as she stared back to a now vanishing ValeClan. "Rainstar gets more and more disheveled every time though so I wouldn't get your hopes up."

Oatpaw hoped so regardless that the next one would be more worth the time. Maybe next time he could learn more about Lightpaw and Snowpaw, and maybe even find a way to tower over Ripplepaw's boasting with his own. The future was resting with a sickening heaviness atop his shoulders with the prophecy, but he tried to enjoy the closer moments of it, the next gathering being one of those.

Next time will *be better.*

chapter eleven

GALETOOTH RESTED PEACEFULLY THAT NIGHT. Being in the confines of a twoleg nest was frightening, but the comfort of Jasmine was enough to keep him asleep. For once in what felt like moons, Galetooth didn't have any nightmares nor did he dream at all. He shut his eyes, let sleep consume him, then as dusk turned to dawn his eyes were suddenly open again.

For once he sat up from his sleep without his chest feeling heavy and his claws tearing at the earth. He had confirmed that the ability to bring back his mate was out there, just unfortunately snug in the mind of an ex-clan cat who now led a treacherous group of rogues. If he could manage to meet with Ibistide and learn the truth of his idea, Galetooth would be one step closer to seeing his love again.

Jasmine was already awake, padding up to Galetooth from where she had been grooming a few tail-lengths away. "Sleep well?" She asked with a purr.

"Yeah... I actually did," Galetooth answered with an assured smile.

"So the kittypet life doesn't seem so bad after all, hm?" Jasmine pestered on, leaning down to look Galetooth in the eyes.

Galetooth snickered at the molly. "Not bad outside the twolegs. They give me the creeps."

Jasmine shrugged as Galetooth stood to his paws, back to his normal height over the she-cat. She was noticeably smaller and more plump than him, obviously never having seen the harshness of a leafbare or a drought in her life. The appearance of her almost made Galetooth envious of the kittypet life in a way that made his head ache afterwards.

"You're in a lot better of a mood today, I see," Jasmine pointed out. "My humans will be awake soon and out of their beds. Would you like to share some food with me before your departure?"

Galetooth could feel his mouth water at the mention of food. "Of course."

He followed the black and white she-cat across the open space of the twoleg den until they approached a wall. At the bottom of the wall lay two objects of bright green color, one of them carrying an able supply of water. The other compartment carried what almost looked to Galetooth like clumps of dirt, the tom stretching forward to sniff at the new discovery. His nose wrenched up in disgust as it smelled like nothing but soil and odd, twoleg remedies to him. Galetooth pulled away and his tongue slipped out ever so slightly in a dramatic display of his disgust, earning a giggle from Jasmine.

"I forget you're used to eating mice and birds." She brushed closely to him to sit and lean over, giving the strange food a sniff and smiling back at him. "It's good, I promise. I also promise I'm not trying to poison you or anything."

"I trust you but I think I'd rather catch a mouse or something when I head back out," Galetooth dismissed with an awkward snicker. He could feel his stomach tighten with hunger but he'd rather lose all his fur than touch that stench Jasmine called food.

Jasmine ate for a moment, Galetooth sticking right at her side. They were positioned with their pelts brushing but Galetooth didn't flinch away from the contact. It was all too similar to the friendly display he had with Rainstar growing up - the comforting kind of friendly that was different from love but lingered so close. For a second he found himself cursing at himself in his head at the thought of it. He and Rainstar's friendship was close and compassionate and he always knew she loved him. Maybe if he never met his love, he and Rainstar would be together, but he did meet her and that was all that mattered. Rainstar would only ever be a friend.

The she-cat beside him straightened back up, glancing at her paws as she spoke. "Are you actually going to go find Ibistide and the Dark Matter?"

Galetooth could sense the sorrow threading through her words and his ears fell at his newfound friend's worry. "I have to. He has the answers I need."

"What answers?" Her questions were agitating, but Galetooth felt cruel to showcase his annoyance or not answer the feline.

"He knows how I can find my mate," Galetooth simply replied.

Jasmine blinked and glanced directly at him. "You have a mate? What's her name?"

Galetooth grinned as her name popped into his mind. After all, he told himself he'd remember that name for moons on moons, didn't he? It was always specially stored away and every time it slipped off his tongue the delivery was gentle and soothing. It was as if honey soaked his tongue and strayed over his lips, its sweetness lingering with an aid that could kill hunger and pain forever.

"Her name is Briarblossom." This time there was a wedge in the middle of her name - a croak of pain. That *was* her name, for now it just lacked the life it always had, and that hurt for him to realize.

"That is a beautiful name," Jasmine mumbled, a chill creeping down Galetooth's spine at her words. "I wish you could find her elsewhere as Ibistide is a cruel cat, Galetooth."

He winced. "I know. I'll be careful."

There was a sudden shuffle from deeper in the nest that alerted the both of them. Galetooth hopped instantly to his paws, fur bristled and ears now perked upright. Jasmine stirred after him, glancing towards the movement with a frantic look then shot back at him.

"My humans are waking up. You've got to go," she exhaled with a sad smile to accompany it.

Jasmine bounded back towards the strange door they had come through the other night, hurrying Galetooth to follow. He glanced back into the nest to ensure no twolegs were already on his tail and pelted after Jasmine. She pushed open the strange door with a paw for him and he crouched lower to the ground, readying himself to squeeze through the exit. He glanced back up at Jasmine though, nodding to the she-cat respectfully.

"Thank you for the shelter and the company," he mumbled to her.

"Maybe our paths will find a way to reconnect someday. I wish you all the best."

"Likewise, *feral* cat," Jasmine purred with a wink.

He flashed her one last smile before he wriggled out of the door. He was lucky he didn't have the need to be stealthy as his back legs flailed for a moment before he raised back to his paws outside the door. The rain had cleared and the sun was rising in the distance, steering its rays right into his eyes and earning a series of pestered blinks. Galetooth glanced back at the door that swung for a moment till it came to a stop, frowning at the disappeared sight of Jasmine. The company was delightful and kept him from being a muddied corpse, but he had to take a path he would never want for her to follow.

-

On the far side of the twoleg stretch the areas grew more narrow and darker. The buzz of twoleg noises became quieter and the sun flinched away from touching certain shadows. It was a lot more like the forest but it reeked of smoke and death, with bones of old prey scattered in the alleyways and rabid creatures growling and howling close to their twoleg nests. There was scratches on every surface and some of the twoleg structures crackled in the wind as if they could tumble at any given movement. It was uncomfortable and decaying compared to the other side of the twoleg stretch.

A mouse shuffled through the shadows of one alleyway, its eyes fixed on a fallen, silver trunk that spilled out with trash. The area had so much of a curse to it that even the most feeble, tiniest creature of the area showed its ribs, the mass of bone swaying uneasily through its skin with every movement. Before it could reach out for the possibility of food in the pile, a flash of claws sunk into its neck, it barely offering a struggle. It spasmed under the mass of its hunter for a moment before it took its last breath, falling limp with a deadness to its eyes that already half-existed.

Galetooth stood over the mouse, satisfied that he had finally caught something in the strange, eerie lands. He lifted his paw and

crouched down alongside his catch, a hunger gnawing at the edge of his stomach as his tongue rolled over his lips. It was a small catch but hopefully enough to suffice his hunger till dusk when hopefully more rats and mice would make their appearance. He sunk into his prey in a bite that was almost ravenous, the tom humming in delight as the flesh settled between his teeth and eased the pain in his stomach.

As he ate though, the smells of smoke and the dead mouse also lingered with something else. His head lifted slowly from his prey, claws drawn with his gaze scanning around his surroundings. Just as he expected the new smell was feline-related, two new shapes of fur at the edge of the alleyway with their forms blinded out by a streak of sunlight. They stepped into the shadows of the narrow stretch though, Galetooth's eyes narrowing and tail lashing behind him as he examined the approaching cats.

One was smaller than the other, her fur missing in a mouthful of patches throughout her pelt. She was a brown tabby with a set of scars laced over her face and half of an ear missing. She looked as if she had been thrown out to wolves for moons and somehow stepped out alive with her rough shape. The larger of the two was a white tom, not appearing as rough compared to his partner outside of one eye being missing and a long, noticeable scar visible across his back. They approached Galetooth with their lips pulled back in a mean snarl, claws scraping against the cold, stone earth and eyes slitted.

"Sorry, I don't have enough to share," Galetooth announced with a sarcastic twinge, earning an irritated sneer from the both of them.

"We're not here for your kit-catch," the brown she-cat hissed, stopping a few fox-lengths away from Galetooth. "You're on our territory!"

Galetooth sat up, glancing the two of them up and down - all too well in making his judgement known. "Territory? This is twoleg land."

"I don't like this one's mouth, Bailey," the brown molly growled in annoyance, looking to her friend for guidance on the situation.

The white tom's one eye narrowed, he and Galetooth's gazes meeting. "You're not the typical kittypet or loner. What are you? Where are you from?" Bailey questioned.

"I'm a clan cat," Galetooth admitted. He didn't want to shy from the truth, after all just from the look of the two of them and their claim of a so-called territory he *knew* they were from Ibistide's group. He needed the situation to stay away from a result of tooth and claw. "I came here in search of a group called the Dark Matter. Do you know of them?"

The brown molly chortled in a rasp and Bailey shot her a pointed look, silencing her in an instant. "We *are* them," Bailey responded, glancing back to Galetooth. "What is it you want? The clans are a far way from here."

"I need to speak to your leader. His name is Ibistide, right?" Galetooth asked, keeping his tone light and encased.

"He's probably a spy from the clans!" The brown she-cat spat. "I knew they'd be out to get us at some point those mangy code-cats!"

Bailey didn't silence his friend this time and his tail began to lash to and fro behind him. "It is odd you've come this far, clan cat. I'll have you know we have a code of our own."

Galetooth stiffened at their cold stares. "And?"

"Keira," Bailey directed to the brown feline. He nodded her towards Galetooth, and the former ValeClan tom raised to his paws in an instant.

"Kill on sight!" Keira yowled out, flinging herself right at Galetooth with outstretched paws.

Galetooth leaped out of her path, claws dragging against the stone and his paw pads burning underneath him. The blood-thirsty she-cat landed where he had stood before, crushing the rest of the mouse underneath a paw as she pounced back after Galetooth. She aimed a blow right from his muzzle, Galetooth ducking to dodge her claws. She was quick to follow with the other paw though, her

claws scoring across Galetooth's cheek. The tom reared away from her swiping, though panic seared through him as he now realized he was pressed against a wall of the narrow path.

Keira cackled and jumped right for him again. Galetooth's adrenaline kicked in and he shoved away his worries of fighting these cats. Bailey was just observing from afar and Galetooth was quick to catch on to their morals. If he wanted their attention, he'd have to win this fight and spill more blood in the end.

Galetooth side-stepped and as Keira whirled around to try and adjust to his dodge, he struck. He lashed out with a full set of claws to the mollies shoulder, earning a cry of pain from the molly as his claws tugged through her skin. She spun around and sunk her teeth back into his shoulder, Galetooth hissing through clenched teeth at her grasp. He used his weight and tossed himself sideways, smacking the clinging she-cat against the stone wall of the alleyway. Her grip loosened and Galetooth turned on her in an instant. *No holding back!*

As Keira staggered from the impact, Galetooth used his larger size to grab her by her scruff. He let his teeth sink into the she-cat for a second then threw her off to the side, Keira unable to catch herself and skidding on her side across the stone. She left a small streak of blood in her path, the once bashful, spitting rogue now looking up and over to him with wide, terrified eyes. Galetooth arched his back and his throat bellowed with a growl.

Shock rippled over the tom though when a set of claws latched onto his haunches. Bailey had reared up and grappled onto him, the larger tom using his strength to haul Galetooth backwards. Galetooth clenched his teeth and threw out his rear legs, pummeling Bailey in his exposed stomach enough to loosen the white tom's grip. Galetooth used the advantage and his agility over the other cat to whirl around and follow up his attack with a quick blow to the face, raking his claws right across his muzzle.

They stood to face one another, snarling with their tails lashing. Keira had stumbled to her paws and bolted over to her ally, growling back from beside him. Galetooth could feel his shoulder and his haunches stinging, but his claws stayed unsheathed and his

ears pinned. If he had to take on both of them to prove himself, so be it.

"Knock it off."

The voice was simple and stern yet low and ominous. All three of their gazes scaled up the alley wall beside them as a shadow towered over them. In the last ray of sunlight stood a cat atop the walls - one of the largest cats Galetooth had ever seen. If an ancient cat had been stripped from their old stories and planted right before his eyes, it would be the cat that stood before them now. She was about the size of a coyote, her face broad and yellow eyes striking like those of a predator. Her orange tabby fur was long and tufted at her ears, making her appear even larger if her pelt were to bristle. Even just standing in her shadow with her glaring down at them was enough to make Galetooth feel as if he were about to die.

"Moira!" Keira called out, though her voice was weaved with an ounce of terror to as the orange mollies gaze shot over to her. "We have a trespasser. He's a clan cat! He-"

"I heard it all - saw most of it too," Moira interrupted, her voice cold and disappointed as she stared down Keira. The disheveled brown tabby shrunk under her stare. "To believe two of you on one cat happens to he such a challenge, hm?"

Bailey bowed his head in shame. "Apologies. I tried to leave most of the fight up to Keira but-"

"Silence!" Moira hissed, earning a frightened puff from both of the rogues' pelts. Her gaze snapped over to Galetooth and he stiffened. "What's your name, clan cat?"

"Galetooth," he answered in a quick breath.

She smiled, appeased at his retort. "And I hear that you're looking for Ibistide?"

He sucked in a breath and nodded.

Moira looked back over to Bailey and Keira. "I suppose you both owe this tom an escort back to base." Relief flooded over Galetooth

at her words but both of the rogues looked shocked - still they didn't dare to testify against it. "After all, you were both going to lose that fight. *Politely* escort our friend here or I'll let Ibistide know how disappointed you've made me today, deal?"

"Yes, Moira," they both responded in unison.

"I'll go ahead and let Ibistide know of his expected company," Moira directed, meeting Galetooth's gaze. "He'll patch you up and you can speak to him. I hope to see you again, *Galetooth*."

She spoke his name with a malicious, toothy grin that made Galetooth shiver, but he only dipped his head to the large cat, careful not to display his terror too much. Her immense shadow disappeared as she leaped off to the other side of the wall and part of Galetooth hoped he *wasn't* going to see her again.

"You're lucky she didn't have you for dinner," Keira spat coldly.

Galetooth only grinned. "That's not so polite now, is it?"

His icy scowl was enough to shut up the feline in an instant, her ears flat as she turned away from him. He was just a few pawsteps away from answers to bring Briarblossom back, and if he was able to shy away from a well respected cat's claws within the rogue group, he was going to use that ability to his advantage for as long as he could.

He didn't like the feeling it left him with though as the rogues terrified glances had turned to him when Moira left. It was a contorting feeling in his stomach that shot an unwavering, poisonous pang of adrenaline through him and it stained a smile across his face. The feeling was almost intoxicating and he frowned the minute the rogues turned away to take lead.

He hoped he could meet Briarblossom again soon for he was *terrified* what parts of him he was uncovering in process.

chapter twelve

CLOUDPAW WAS AWFULLY MOROSE AFTER SHE COULDN'T ATTEND THE GATHERING. She and Oatpaw had always pondered when they were kits what their first gathering would be like, and now only one of them had the experience of it before the other. She was bitter for a few days though reluctant to show it through coldness. She often just shrugged off conversation or even dismissed Sandnettle's offers for extra training or patrols. She tended to express her anger through silence and desolation, as she'd rather claw her own fur off than get into an argument.

The only cat she really found herself still wanting to he around during those days was Mudpaw. Sandnettle had proposed multiple times that it was Mudpaw's fault more than Cloudpaw's over what happened, but Cloudpaw couldn't bring herself to blame them. They all made mistakes and Mudpaw learned his lesson when he nearly died from that coyote. The image of him being shaken around like played with prey was stuck in Cloudpaw's mind, burdening her and making her sick to her stomach. He was just as dispirited as she was after the incident and stuck in the Starlinked den for days for proper care, so she did all she could to make him feel better.

Now Mudpaw had returned to his normal routines and the apprentice den. They had moved their nests closer to one another and outside of training they were stuck to them for most the day, chatting about anything and everything. Mousepaw passed with light scoffs at them while Oatpaw shot Mudpaw glares whenever the other apprentice wasn't looking. Cloudpaw knew Oatpaw blamed Mudpaw for what happened, but her brother's behavior made her pelt bush out in irritation sometimes.

It was mid-day and the gathering had just happened yesterday. Oatpaw hurriedly explained to her a few things that happened at the gathering when she first woke. He told her about the ValeClan apprentices and Rainstar's abrupt rudeness. From what Cloudpaw could tell, Oatpaw's first gathering wasn't all that delightful and

that made her stomach feel a little lighter.

Mudpaw was rolling onto his stomach in his nest beside her, the two yet to have made their departure from the den. "Do you think Doebounce and Nightfang like one another?" He asked.

"I think I'd have bees for brains if I thought otherwise," Cloudpaw huffed in amusement.

"Fair. She's barely batted an eye at me being stuck in the Starlinked den. I think in the long run she was just happy it gave her all this free time to spend with Nightfang," Mudpaw scowled.

Cloudpaw sighed and attempted to reassure her friend with a smile. "I'm sure she cares a lot about you. You're her first apprentice even though she's been a warrior for quite a while now. I just know half of her conversations with Nightfang are about you."

"Yeah but what if they have kits soon and I'm stuck without a mentor?" Mudpaw added with a fold of his ears to the back of his head.

"I'm sure kits is the last thing on Nightfang's mind since he lost Finchspot," Cloudpaw replied in reference to the tom's old mate. "Mom always told me she was expecting his kits when she passed... Very terrible."

A frown deepened onto Mudpaw's face. "Yeah... That is terrible." He shuffled his paws as he sat up, glancing sideways at Cloudpaw. "Cloudpaw... How would you have felt if I *did die* the other day? What would you have done?"

Cloudpaw blinked repeatedly, a little taken aback by his sudden question. His gaze was plastered to her as he awaited an answer and she nearly stumbled over her words. "Well, you *didn't* die and that's what I'm grateful for."

Mudpaw appeared disappointed in his answer for a moment but then beckoned to her scar that lacerated her cheek to her neck. "I'm just asking because... Our scars complete one another, don't they?" He queried with a shy grin, nodding to his shoulder scar.

She didn't entirely understand what he was insinuating as his was a bite scar and he's done by a claw, different in appearance. His smile said it all though and the way he inched ever so slightly closer to her. Her ear tips heated up and she grew flustered, though before she could reply to Mudpaw a cat had strode up to the entrance of the apprentice den.

"You two going to be sparring today with Oatpaw as advised by Sandnettle and I both," Willowmist spoke as the apprentice's turned to eye her, Sandnettle appearing beside her. "Doebounce is coming and insisted you try and teach the younger apprentices some moves yourself Mudpaw."

Mudpaw's jaws parted as if to argue but Willowmist instantly spoke again before he could speak. "No if, ands, or buts about it either. You two are *apprentices* - very able ones at that. You won't be warriors if you mope around all day."

Sometimes I hate that Oatpaw got her as mentor, Cloudpaw thought out of pure envy. Willowmist was *always* right and very respected. Her word around warriors and apprentices was almost just as equal to Talonstar and Berrytuft's word. She was sincere but stern when need be, as showcased by her constant beckoning and narrowed eyes to the apprentices as she hurried them out of their nests.

They exited the den and Sandnettle scooted to Cloudpaw's side, leaning down to mumble in her ear. "You okay today?"

She only answered with a nod and half of a smile. Sandnettle appeared worried but backed down from his questioning. She appreciated his concern but she was also growing *tired* of cats asking if she was okay.

Doebounce bounded over from where she was chatting with Nightfang and Flamedance, touching her nose to Mudpaw's ear. Cloudpaw noticed him smile at her touch, happy for her friend's recognition of his mentor's care. "Are you guys ready? Oatpaw's waiting for us at the top of the camp wall. He is a little too impatient," Doebounce noted with a glance at his mentor, Willowmist.

"And if we keep him waiting any longer he'll start training himself," Willowmist added with a grin before beckoning the group to follow her.

They scaled up the camp wall where Oatpaw was waiting, shuffling his paws. He beamed when he noticed their arrival, Willowmist approaching her apprentice and touching noses with him. Cloudpaw felt her gut twist. It was so easy for Oatpaw to connect with every cat around him and Cloudpaw always seemed to struggle. She was so glued to her mother as a kit and now as an apprentice all she was known as was the half-tailed one who nearly got killed alongside Mudpaw.

As the group set off to find a suitable clearing, Cloudpaw found himself in the rear of the group. Mudpaw was rambling to Doebounce ahead and Cloudpaw felt a twinge a jealousy. After all, Mudpaw was the only cat she could bring herself to speak to for the last few days and now its as if she was tucked away in the back of his mind. She shook off the negative feeling though as she noticed Oatpaw slow his pace to walk beside her.

She was prepared for his sternness on her behavior. Oatpaw criticized her for her and Mudpaw's sneaking out more than their own mother had. He appeared overly upset but the whole ordeal, almost choking up every time he pestered her on how she could've died out there. Now she hadn't really spoken to him since and showed more closeness to Mudpaw, who Oatpaw obviously had grown a dislike towards.

"You ready to lose every spar today?" Oatpaw started with a smirk, his lightness shocking Cloudpaw for a moment.

She was unable to format a response but eventually a smile crept onto her face and she felt a little more of herself return to her. "I think you should be asking *yourself* that," she corrected challengingly.

Oatpaw slinked closer to her, shoulder-to-shoulder as he lightly nudged her. "Y'know... I've missed you," he started in a murmur that was rasped with an edge of sorrow, making Cloudpaw's ears drop. "We haven't been on patrols together or training together since...

Well, I just haven't seen you much. I don't think I can go another day of just having Mousepaw show me herbs then make fun of me for not liking the smell of them."

"I've missed you too Oatpaw, I'm sorry," Cloudpaw admitted with a sigh. "It's just been a lot but I want to hang out with you more. I can't promise I'll instantly feel better after today but I'm trying."

"You don't have to *instantly* feel better. Just let me bother you a little more, okay?" Oatpaw reassured with a chuckle.

Cloudpaw smiled. "Of course."

As they came to a clearing in the woods, Mudpaw fell in beside her earning a sharp stare for a moment from Oatpaw. Mudpaw didn't take much notice to his coldness for Oatpaw looked away every time he glanced back, but Cloudpaw knew all too well of it. If Mudpaw learned more about Oatpaw's newfound dislike for him, the other tom would be sure to make a big deal out of it. Cloudpaw could only imagine the arguments and it made her feel tight in her chest to think about it.

Willowmist turned from in between Sandnettle and Doebounce ahead, scanning her gaze over the apprentices. "You all have had your fair share of moves learned, but how well can you actually use them and tactical senses to fight?" Willowmist began. "Every fight isn't about a pattern of swats and knowing more moves than the other. You must learn your opponent. Compare their size to yours, agility, strength, and more. You find an advantage and you use that."

Doebounce stepped forward as Willowmist nodded to her then Mudpaw. "Mudpaw and Doebounce will spar as a demonstration. Mudpaw, not only are you learning yourself, but you are making a showcase to these younger ones. Fight wisely."

Mudpaw beamed and lifted his chin to the sky, chest puffed out with pride. It made Cloudpaw happy to see him take so well to being back out and training and not confined to their dens. A deep, gnawing part of her missed being glued to the darkness of their den and only having one another, but it also made her chest feel a little

less heavy. All Mudpaw could bring himself to talk about was the attack when they isolated themselves and Cloudpaw's ears felt as if they were running with blood at some points. She hated every time he brought up how he failed and how they could've died, but she was willing to listen because she cared about him. She cared about him so much.

Willowmist and Sandnettle padded over to their apprentices' sides. She flicked her tail to the other two. "Feel free to begin."

Mudpaw didn't hesitate as the apprentice flung himself at his mentor. She pedaled backwards to rear away from him but Mudpaw was quick with his landing to lurch back after her. He barreled into her upper stomach and the two were sent rolling with a blur of flailing paws and lashing tails. Doebounce's size and strength was significant to Mudpaw's though, the she-cat ending the roll into a pin on the apprentice.

"A larger opponent will always be able to grapple a pin a lot easier." Cloudpaw's shoulder fur spiked as Sandnettle's voice alarmed her. He smiled apologetically when she glanced over before leaning more in to his apprentice, whispering words of advice to her. "But don't think being smaller *isn't* an advantage."

Cloudpaw remembered the coyote standing over Mudpaw as Doebounce stood with a fake, bellowing growl over her apprentice. She remembered how the thin but larger creature glared down him with a stare fueled of hunger, drool lining its lips. She felt a terrified shiver encompass her as the fight continued, Mudpaw managing to pummel her stomach and roll away from the pin.

Doebounce lashed a paw out and Mudpaw ducked underneath it. He side-stepped another then lunged forward, following her own blows with one directly to her face. Doebounce staggered and blinked repeatedly due to his blow. Mudpaw used this moment to his advantage and reared up to gain some height, delivering more strikes down on the she-cat.

"You want to keep a larger and stronger enemy as disoriented as possible. The more attacks you can land on them, the better chance you have of winning."

Cloudpaw remembered her attempt to fight back but only she ended up disorientated. The memory of Mudpaw's body being helplessly shaken in the creature's jaws rattled her. Her eyes went wide and glossed over as she was trapped in a replay of that scene. The blood, the snarling, and the panic was all she could bring herself to hear and feel all over again. If she had known to fight better, maybe she could've helped Mudpaw more, but instead she could only watch as he nearly died.

By the time she blinked out of her thoughts, Doebounce had pinned Mudpaw down again with a grin to end the spar. She stepped off her apprentice and he stood with a grumble, her flicking her tail over his ears. He appeared irritated by his loss but still managed to grin back at his mentor as she spoke to him softly and proudly.

"You two are up now," Willowmist spoke, beckoning to Oatpaw and Cloudpaw. "Show us what you've learned and what you *will* learn."

Cloudpaw had barely paid attention to Mudpaw and Doebounce's fight. Doebounce and Mudpaw stepped aside as Oatpaw and Cloudpaw padded to the center of the clearing, facing one another. Their mentors and the others didn't waver in their observant stares latched onto the both of them. They were *special* - proposed saviors of their future. Their showcase in every session was a showcase to that future. Cloudpaw couldn't disappoint, even though in the end she knew she already had and would continue to do so.

She faced her brother with her head low and haunches high. Everything about her stance read that she was ready for battle with her half-tail lashing behind her and eyes slitted. Her paws felt heavy on the earth though and every movement and noticed stare from the others made the soil feel as if it was faltering underneath her weight. The pressure was on more than it ever had been before and she had so many things to prove. Oatpaw faced her with a more simple stance though, a faked growl rumbling in his throat as he smiled at his sister.

"Begin!" Willowmist commanded from aside.

Oatpaw dashed for Cloudpaw, leaping for her with outstretched paws. Cloudpaw jumped to the side to dodge and spun around,

aiming a blow for her brother's side. It was successful as the tom nearly staggered over with his landing. She whirled around to follow it up with another swat to his face when he turned back to her, Oatpaw flaring his nostrils at his sibling.

Cloudpaw squeaked in surprise with Oatpaw swatted back, his paw grazing her cheek. She stepped backwards and ducked away from another. Oatpaw then leaped forward, wrapping his paws around her and latching his jaws onto her shoulder. He bit down enough to lift her skin but not to harm her but still Cloudpaw felt a simmer of pain. It wasn't the physical kind that made her blood run cold and her breathing loud but the emotional kind that could picture nothing aside from her fight with the coyote.

She hissed and rolled onto her side, crushing Oatpaw under her weight for a moment. He shrilled and let go of her shoulder. Cloudpaw was quick to scramble back to her paws before he could and place him in a pin. She held one paw at the bottom of his throat and the other planted on his chest. She grinned down at her brother, leaning closer to him.

"I thought you were going to win?" Cloudpaw taunted.

"I'm not even *close* to being done," Oatpaw huffed.

Cloudpaw felt his rear paws begin to pummel her stomach and her balance began to falter. Oatpaw used the moment she lifted one of her paws to roll away from her. The tom then reared up to gain height over Cloudpaw, a blow delivered right to the top of her head that caused her to blink repeatedly for a moment. She felt his paws smack down on her shoulder and her neck as she struggled to duck away from his blows.

His blows became a pattern though. They were rhythmic and easily memorable. After a moment Cloudpaw finally reacted, grasping her jaws around one of his paws as they tried to strike down on her shoulder. Oatpaw's eyes went wide as she sunk her weight lower and pulled. She let go and pounced back as Oatpaw flailed to the ground, landing with a *thud* and a small cloud of dirt.

Cloudpaw's pride was addictive in that moment as she noticed

Sandnettle nodding in approval and Mudpaw beaming at her success. She was proving herself with every move and dodge. Her pelt bushed out in satisfaction and a grin so bright it could've been molded out of pure sunlight stained her face.

Oatpaw's yowl startled her out of her triumphant moment. The brown and white apprentice flung himself right at her and collided into her. The two of them rolled for a moment with dirt sinking into her fur and settling at the corners of her eyes. Oatpaw had found a grasp over her in the middle of the roll though, the breath nearly being knocked out of Cloudpaw as he used all his weight to end the roll and pin her beneath him.

Cloudpaw coughed away the dirt that corroded onto her tongue during the roll and looked up at her brother. She expected him to boast as she just lay there to succumb to defeat, her paws feeling a little sore and her chest tight. Oatpaw leaned down though and pressed his nose to her's, a soft chuckle erupting from the tom.

"Told you I'd win."

Cloudpaw wanted to be amused alongside him but she couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment. She scoffed at his words and as soon as he released his pin she pulled away from him. She stood to her paws and shook her fur free from all the dirt. Sandnettle bounded over to her in an instant, touching his nose to her ear.

"You fought very well for your first spar, Cloudpaw," he purred to her.

She lost her touch of pride though and the earth felt uneven beneath her. "I didn't win though," Cloudpaw muttered with a stare down at her paws. How was she supposed to defend her clan if she lost to other apprentices *and* coyotes?

"You're barely two moons old and have so many more spars to win. Oatpaw and you both made mistakes in your spar," Sandnettle explained. He then leaned closer to whisper the next part in her ear with a snicker. "Plus, you *totally* kicked his tail."

Cloudpaw grinned at her mentor and Oatpaw shuffled over with a

nudge to his sister. "You did a lot better than I did if I were to be honest," Oatpaw praised.

"You both are excellent," Willowmist added, padding over with Mudpaw and Doebounce right at her side. "The ancestors have chosen the future of our clans *perfectly*."

Cloudpaw felt her heart grow heavy with Willowmist's words and she noticed Oatpaw frown out of the corner of her eyes. The future of the clans in their paws felt substantial to the both of them and rotted between their pads like old blood to the stones of a creek. Every movement of them was not only theirs but a pawstep for all of CoppiceClan itself towards the future and Cloudpaw didn't know if were they capable of fulfilling that destiny.

But she'd try to the stars and back if she had to no matter the pain of it.

chapter thirteen

GALETOOTH WAS BROUGHT TO A LARGE, OLD TWOLEG HOUSE THAT THE Dark Matter referred to as their base. The mouths of the den were immense and open, all of their camp visible from the outside. Steel branches stretched over the top of it where some cats perched, having climbed the wielded twoleg bridges up and around the structure. Every cat watched him with beady, observant eyes as Bailey and Keira led him up one of the bridges and to a walled off area, a door barely visible through crippled vines and rubble.

"Wait in there," Bailey demanded in a cold tone, his shoulder delivering a shove to Galetooth as he strode back past him. Keira followed him but not without shooting a glare back at the former ValeClanner.

Bitter bird-brains, Galetooth insulted in his thoughts as he glared back after them. The tom then shook off their impudence and stepped into the makeshift den, peeling aside the vines with a paw.

His gaze scanned the new area just a smaller version of their base. The stench of herbs made his muzzle twitch in an instant, swiveling his gaze to the right. Along the walls there was storage of moss and herbs tucked away into twoleg-made burrows in the wall. All of it was beautifully organized as Galetooth observed walking alongside the storage. Some lacked numbers compared to others but there was plenty enough to keep cats alive and breathing if need be.

In the far corner of the area was a nest. The nest was constructed using moss and feathers but also decorated off to the side with a few silver pebbles. Galetooth approached the larger nest, bowing his head to sniff it. Something about the nest wreaked of the metallic tang of blood, drawing him away from it swiftly. He scrunched up his muzzle and narrowed his eyes. *Does everything about these cats involve death?*

"So, you're Galetooth?"

The voice stimulated the fur along his spine to rise in an instant. He whirled around with his paws planted firmly to face the stranger. A black and white tom strolled into the den and through the vines, his yellows eyes narrowed. There was a scar ripped down the side of his face and the moment Galetooth recognized it he held his breath and flattened his fur. The tom approached Galetooth calmly, glancing him up and down with a skeptical look.

"I am," Galetooth answered briskly.

"I don't blame you for being nosey. Being a clan cat tears you away from a lot of sights to see," Ibistide started with a hum. He strode past Galetooth to stand beside the nest. "Tell me, do you like stories, Galetooth?"

The brown and white tom nodded slowly. "Yes."

"This is my nest, beautifully assembled by Moira herself. I found her when she was merely an abandoned kit. She used to hunt pebbles like they were prey before she was big enough and insisted she keep them as treasures," Ibistide told with a flick of his tail towards the pebbles. "You would keep your kits treasures as your own, wouldn't you?"

Galetooth felt a slash deep into his heart at the mention of kits and his breath hitched for a moment before he spoke. "Of course I would."

"That's why you're still alive, Galetooth. Moira saw your strength in battle and your dedication. She saw a promise in you she knew I could also see," Ibistide explained, cocking his head over his shoulder to grin at Galetooth. "How about we get you patched up?"

Galetooth blinked after the tom as he padded over to his herb storage. He couldn't believe for a moment that a cat tied to a tale of treachery was standing before him and if it made it any worse, he was seeing a *promise* in Galetooth. The whole thing made Galetooth feel queasy but he kept his cool, sitting and curling his tail around his paws as he waited for Ibistide to address him again.

It was interesting to him how Bailey and Keira didn't stop to have

their wounds treated as well. Though the fight was small, there was still wounds developed out of it. Perhaps it was because Ibistide would have to see Galetooth first and they didn't want to be in any proximity of him. Galetooth *wasn't* complaining about them not being around either.

"Any of your wounds still bleeding?" Ibistide questioned.

"It's really just my shoulder and my haunches. My cheek is a light scratch," Galetooth retorted.

"Hm," Ibistide thoughtfully breathed as he scanned his gaze over his herb storage. "I'll apply a poultice to all of them in case of infection and I'll dress the two that are bleeding with cobwebs. We don't want you leaving blood trails for wolves now, do we?"

Galetooth shivered at the mention of wolves, staring down at his paws. The tips of his toes were stained with splashes of blood and he winced at the sight. He glanced back up though as Ibistide padded back over, the tom crouching beside him as he applied a chewed remedy to his wounds. The wounds stung a little at the cold touch of the poultice but Galetooth remained still. As he treated Galetooth's cheek, the former ValeClanner tried not to rear back in disgust, Ibistide's breath reeking all the same as his nest. The rogues may as well have worn flesh as their pelts if the scent of death was carried around with them that much.

The tom peeled away for a moment then returned with cobwebs, speaking as he dressed Galetooth's shoulder first. "What is it that you've travelled all the way out here for?"

"I heard the stories about why you disappeared from ValeClan. I heard about how you can revive the dead," Galetooth spoke. He searched Ibistide for a reaction but the tom was stone-faced as his focus remained on the wound. "I have a mate that was killed by wolves a few moons ago. Her name is Briarblossom and... I wish to bring her back."

"Tell me about her," Ibistide directed.

Galetooth clenched his teeth. He wished these cats would just let

him get to the point of his mission but they delivered delay after delay. He needed to stay on Ibistide's good side though no matter how much he vexed him.

"Well, she was from CoppiceClan. She lost her parents rather young and has a sister," Galetooth started briefly. As he went on though, his heart felt lighter as he talked about her. "We met at a gathering when we were apprentices. She was so nice. We insisted on talking at every gathering after that and even outside of them. I would meet her almost every night and sometimes a warrior named Talonflight tagged along as well. The older we became the less he showed up and the more we talked about becoming mates."

"When Talonstar became leader, the first thing he did was exile Briarblossom," Galetooth explained, his ears pinned against the back of his head. His heart felt a little heavier - and colder. "Rainstar was hesitant to accept her in ValeClan instantly so we found an old twolegplace at the edge of the territory that she would stay instead. Sometimes her sister and even Talonstar checked on her but I hated my old friend for his cruelness. She missed CoppiceClan so much but I insisted ValeClan would eventually be our home together and we could have the kits we always talked about having."

Ibistide paused his dressing as Galetooth bowed his head, continuing. "When my kin got very ill back at ValeClan, I didn't visit her for a few moons. I wanted to care for my brother and his family and not risk passing any sickness to my mate. When they were cured though and Rainstar gave me the go ahead, I went to go see her for the first time in forever and..." He sat in a silence that could kill, but it was a shame that it already had. "I returned to find her body mangled by wolves. Thank the stars I had a body to bury but she was dead... My love, my heart, was *dead.* Can you imagine what it's like to have that just so suddenly taken away from you?"

"My siblings both died back in ValeClan. Storkclaw died to an unexpected illness and Shrikefoot..." A growl bellowed in Ibistide's throat as he moved to apply the cobwebs to the rest of Galetooth's wounds. "Shrikefoot was killed by Hollowshade."

Galetooth had heard the part of the story before where

Hollowstorm accidentally killed Shrikefoot defending himself. Ibistide's voice was laced with poison as he spoke about it though, as if he saw Hollowshade as nothing more than a cold-hearted murderer.

Before Galetooth could respond, Ibistide finished his dressing and looked to him with a question. "Is that rock-head still alive?"

Galetooth nodded and he watched as a bitter twist took to Ibistide's expression. He whisked around to return the remainder of his cobwebs back to their spot. There was a stillness between them for a moment before Galetooth's impatience itching at his paws rose to his throat.

"I want to learn your ways of revival."

Ibistide didn't turn around. "I don't think you're ready for that."

"I think I am," Galetooth challenged though he kept his tone low and cool.

"You'll need to prove yourself first," Ibistide responded, earning a prickle of frustration from Galetooth.

"I'll do *anything*." He would. He told Briarblossom he'd always do anything for her. It never felt as terrifying as it did now though.

Ibistide finally glanced back, a grin sliding onto his face as they made eye contact. "Good." He turned away again, heading towards the exit. "But I propose first that you get some rest. It's been a long journey for you, hasn't it? Enjoy the comfort of my nest tonight. You deserve a long sleep."

Galetooth wanted to prove himself right then and there but he stifled his urges. He dipped his head to Ibistide and stood back up. The black and white tom peered back at him one last before his departure though, his grin unmoved and his expression enough to tell a thousand stories. His words were ominous but there was a sternness to them that made Galetooth stiffen.

"One last thing... Embrace what your dreams have to show you tonight. *Don't be afraid.*"

-

When Galetooth's eyes opened, he found himself in unfamiliar territory. He was standing at one of the highest points of a mountain range, the rest of the stretch beneath him glossed over with thick, dark fog. The atmosphere was cold and thick, every breath taken as if he were almost breathing in pits of smoke. He shivered and his pelt bristled against the breeze that crawled across him. Ahead of him was a chasm, its mouth pried open like the jaws of a lunging serpent. Old rock hung like fangs from the roof and dripped with water, plopping right before his paws only to then disappear without a trace.

The chasm was pitch black in all of its entirety until a pair of piercing, yellow eyes stared back at him. He shrunk down a little out of terror but his claws were unsheathed, prepared for any attack. He remembered that Ibistide told him not to be afraid of his dreams and embrace them but he was still stiff, the atmosphere sickening on his lungs and tight on his throat. The eyes strode closer to develop a face out of the darkness and paws, black with a silver fade to the strange cat's fur. They were large and muscular, the weight of their shoulders rippling underneath their longer fur. They stayed half in the shadows as they greeted Galetooth, eyes practically burning into his flesh.

"Galetooth, it is?" Her voice was colder than the atmosphere itself and every syllable could've been laced with venom.

Galetooth could only nod, keeping his defensive stance firm. She grinned at him, the corners of that grin so deep into her face it was as if they were hooked by the snagging claws of a wolf. She turned and beckoned him to follow with her tail, not even bothering to speak or ensure he was following as she slipped back into the darkness.

He was hesitant for a moment until he inhaled sharply and bounded forward to pursue the she-cat. He stepped into the darkness of the cavern and the atmosphere changed immediately. He was able to breathe lighter and the air felt warmer. The chasm grew lighter as he trailed through it, the silver faded she-cat's form becoming

visible again. The chasm walls had pillars of stone that began to glow and waver as she stepped past them, visions of forestry and more glossily displayed over their surface. Galetooth was astonished by the showcase from the unfamiliar world. *This wasn't just a dream.*

"Who are you?" Galetooth exhaled in question, eyes wide.

She grimaced over her shoulder. "I'm Silverwolf. That name clicks with you, doesn't it?"

She was right and that fact gnawed at his stomach. Silverwolf was a cat Goldenstar used to pass around stories about all the time. She was a former CoppiceClanner who left the clan to be with a ValeClanner named Quickflame. She killed her way to the top of the clan and ruled it with treachery, becoming one of the worst cats any could tell a hushed tale about. It wasn't until her own mate murdered her to save ValeClan that her cruelness was put to an end. Seeing her only meant one thing: Galetooth was in the Dark Range.

He had heard stories about the Dark Range before. Elders said it was a place dedicated to cats of cruelty and madness. They foretold that the resting place of the evil was a shadowy range of mountains just like this but only that it always sat in darkness with no light to it at all. This was different though as the chasm grew lighter the further they traveled into it, the pillars glistening as Silverwolf's tail whisked across them. As her tail brushed across one pillar, Galetooth's eyes widened as it flashed a gray-blue image of the ValeClan valleys, Hollynose and Lightpaw pursuing after a rabbit.

"You wouldn't expect cats placed in such a place to have such access, hm?" Silverwolf stated in an airy, half-snicker. "Too bad when your clans were made we were given almost just as much power in a way as your good-pawed ancestors."

Galetooth blinked in confusion. Given power? He parted his jaws to question her but then her heard a sickening rattling from the shadows beside him. His head cocked towards the sound in an instant and his heart plummeted to the deepest abyss of his chest. The form of a cat was sitting in the shadows half-rotted, only half of its face that of a living corpse. Its other side of its face was eyeless and that of a hollowed out skull, its bone tracing over the rest of its

body with no fur remaining. Every movement it made slipped one bone against the other and with no flesh to drown out the noise it was audible and grueling to hear. Galetooth could feel the bile raise in his throat and panic flare through his body at the sight.

"Cats who live here with regrets in their actions slowly lose their form," Silverwolf explained, stepping over to the skeletal cat. Its alive side of its face's eye went wide at the sight of her but only that part of its body could twist and react, the rest of it still. "The more regretful they become, the more dead they actually are. They'll lose their control over their own body and their inability to speak and become nothing but voiceless corpses to follow given commands only."

She gestured him away from the skeleton and towards a pillar that flashed into an empty den, a lonesome nest in the middle. "The only power we still have is the ability to observe. Our reach does stretch further than the ancestors, hence why Dark Matter sacrifices come here and easily rot to bone," Silverwolf told. *Sacrifices?* "I am able to collect souls through these pillars that have blood cold enough to breathe here. Sacrifices though, they are given to me no matter how cold their blood runs, *even within the clans* if the ritual is performed right."

Galetooth tensed up at her words. Was the ritual she was referring to that of which Ibistide used to revive? It would explain as to why he tried to kill Hollowshade all those moons ago.

Before he or Silverwolf could address one another again, a cat appeared on the pillar. Galetooth felt his blood run cold and his claws scratch at the stone surface beneath him as he recognized the muscular, tabby form of Talonstar. The CoppiceClan leader strolled to his nest with a pensive expression kept just to himself in the confines of his den. He curled up and rested his head on his paws, a frown like a pitiful trench burrowed onto his face.

"Tell me Galetooth, do you hate this tom?" Silverwolf asked, peering sideways at him.

The question had an easy answer now but it still sat sourly on the end of his tongue. He once saw a friend in Talonstar. He agitated

him when they were apprentices but he grew to appreciate his presence. Talonstar helped train him and teach him about CoppiceClan territory every time he met with Briarblossom and him. There was a bitterness that overcame that tom slowly over those moons though and made him into nothing but a cat fueled by odious intentions. When he exiled Briarblossom and told all his clanmates that she disappeared, Galetooth felt a sense of betrayal that turned into the gnawing wake of hate.

"I do. I hate him with every tooth and claw I have," Galetooth hissed through clenched teeth.

"Do you regret that hatred? Do you regret anything that hatred will make you *do?"*

"No." The answer was brisk but still there was a twinge of doubt that burned in the back of his throat at the delivery.

Silverwolf narrowed her eyes. "Good."

When Silverwolf stepped away, Galetooth spotted a shadow standing as if it were alive, the edges of its form saturated as it stood barely dark enough to be a full shadow. It stared right at the pillar just as they had but made no sound or notions. There was a stillness to it until Galetooth exhaled and its gaze swapped to him quickly as if it could hear him. In the blink of an eye, it disappeared into thin air, and the Dark Range only became way more eerie.

He sucked in a breath and bounded back after Silverwolf. "Why am I here?" Galetooth queried. He wanted to add that he felt as if he didn't *belong* there at all, but the words teetered back down his throat as if he were swallowing back a lie.

"I want to train you. I want you to see through these pillars and learn how it feels to release all your hatred. All the vain," Silverwolf responded. "Only then will your path to revival be more fulfilling. After all, you don't want to sacrifice just any cat, do you?"

A pair of claws slashed right through Galetooth's heart. He knew exactly what she meant and he glanced back behind him at the pillar that once showcased Talonstar. Ibistide may have not told

him about all the details about the ritual yet, but now Silverwolf made it clear he needed a sacrifice. It was confirmed he would have to *kill* to bring Briarblossom back.

Silverwolf turned to face him, a quizzical yet wicked mold to her expression. "So, are you willing?"

He looked her in the eye. He looked a murderer right in the face and didn't flinch. It was as if he was staring right towards death and inviting it into his life. At least he had all the control over it this time and *nothing* would change that. The shadow stood behind him again, head over his shoulder as he dipped his head to her, a notion that solidified just how in love with Briarblossom he really was.

And if there was any cat he'd kill, it'd be him, for he was to blame for all of this. To Galetooth, this was vigilantism in its coldest form, and he was willing to walk that path if he had to.

chapter fourteen

THE FOREST WAS STUNNING AT THE CRACK OF DAWN. Sun rolled through the branches in slivers and waves, caressing the undergrowth in golden glows. The smallest creatures of the forest woke from their slumber and crawled around to bat at dew from the morning fog or sit in the first touch of the sunlight. It was beautiful at this time as leafbare was to arrive completely any day now. The first breach of sunlight meant a quench to the cold air that had brutally taken to their territories since the last gathering. It was appreciated and almost worshipped, patrols starting later so they could walk through the sunlight and not shiver about without it.

Leaves also now dressed the forest floor completely but had began to lose most of their color. They had a dead crunch underneath their paws, brown and brittle. The trees were starting to only dangle with stragglers now that teetered so easily in the slightest of breezes. Leafbare was coming fast and they all had dreaded it since the beginning of their clans, they could only just pray it wouldn't snow terribly just as it had the last one.

Oatpaw was in the first morning patrol of the day, the sun soaking through his fur and to his skin like the first rain after a drought. He enjoyed this weather as it wasn't hot at all nor could it be devastatingly cold with the sun being out now. The breeze was light and frogs croaked in the distance more than usual. A smile stained his face as he trotted alongside Willowmist with Flickerwing, Hawkstorm, and Webtail ahead of them.

They eventually arrived to the border where the trees grew more distance between one another. The pine-like scent of their own mixed with the more unusual scents of ValeClan. Oatpaw's nose scrunched a little every time he caught the other clan's scent. Willowmist described their scent as that of a fish infested pond.

Oatpaw had never tried or even seen a fish, but just by the scent he had assumed he would never really want to. It was no wonder CoppiceClanner's didn't want to hunt that prey or even swim in its territory.

"Willowmist, Hawkstorm, and Oatpaw, I want you all to check out Stone Pools. Flickerwing and I will head in the opposite direction to do some remarking and also ensure no signs of coyotes," Webtail instructed, Flickerwing leaping over instantly to his former mentor's side.

Willowmist nodded to her brother and turned to Hawkstorm and Oatpaw with a grin. "We get the fun part of the patrol this time," she remarked with a nudge to Oatpaw's shoulder.

Usually Webtail always gave himself Stone Pools when on border patrols. He and Willowmist always did border patrols at dawn together, therefore Oatpaw was there almost all the time now as well. Willowmist would roll her eyes if Webtail picked Stone Pools for himself as he loved to run his mouth to ValeClan's dawn patrol. It had gotten to a point where Willowmist told him some ValeClanner's were going to start sleeping in even later so they could avoid his earful of a wrath.

Willowmist led Oatpaw and Hawkstorm down the border and towards Stone Pools. The scent of ValeClan became even stronger at their approach, making Oatpaw's fur fluff. ValeClan and CoppiceClan had avoided conflict for moons but there was still casual arguments from time to time that Oatpaw had witnessed himself. Darkcloud, a bold-faced ValeClan warrior, had once snapped at Mudpaw once during a patrol and Doebounce left him with a mouthful of ridicule afterwards. Most arguments were always settled but Oatpaw knew some ValeClanners and CoppiceClanners had their grievances with one another.

When they stepped out to the pools, the sight of three ValeClanner's talking amongst themselves there came into view. Oatpaw immediately recognized Lightpaw and her mentor Hollynose, though the silver and white tom with them was unfamiliar. They turned to acknowledge them with differing reactions. Lightpaw was vibrantly beaming whilst Hollynose took on a more serious - but

welcoming - expression. The tom that accompanied them had a more sour and rigid twist to his face, eyes narrowed as they approached. Willowmist was very benevolent though, bowing her head to them politely.

"Good day to you all. How has ValeClan been?" Willowmist questioned, Hawkstorm and Oatpaw taking both of her sides to listen closely.

"We've been fine, just hunting more for the approach of leafbare. The air is starting to grow colder and the streams will freeze over soon," Hollynose answered. "Any more coyote sightings for CoppiceClan?"

Willowmist shook her head. "Not as of recently. We are on high alert though."

"I'll kill those coyotes for what the one did to our apprentices, I swear on the stars," Hawkstorm grumbled, making Oatpaw shiver.

As the warriors chatted, Oatpaw took notice to Lightpaw staring intensely at him. At first he nervously eyed her out the corner of his vision as the staring made him mildly uncomfortable, but then he finally met his friend's gaze. She appeared as if she needed something, which was quickly confirmed by her beckoning her head to the left to direct him away from the others. He stepped aside with a glance at Willowmist, who appeared too trapped in her conversation to acknowledge him and Lightpaw. Lightpaw followed him, inching close to him with her head ducked.

"Rainstar has been asking Snowpaw and I to speak to you whenever we see you," Lightpaw mumbled.

Oatpaw was bewildered. What did the ValeClan leader want with him and why was it being told to him through secretive whispers by apprentices? "What do you mean?" He queried.

Lightpaw shrugged. "She told us if we ever saw you to tell you to meet her at Stone Pools that night. Something about she *needs* to talk to you."

"That doesn't sound suspicious at all," Oatpaw huffed under his breath. Through the oddness of the situation though, Oatpaw assumed it was about the prophecy. Did the prophecy have an extension to ValeClan? Did Rainstar just want a part of the prophecy for ValeClan?

"Rainstar isn't the type to scheme or cause trouble. I bet if she wants to speak to you, it's something of importance," Lightpaw reassured in a whisper.

Oatpaw held his breath for a moment before exhaling, a little cloud forming in the air in front of him. "Fine. I'll sneak out to see her. If some cat sees me and I get in trouble though, I *will* report this to my father. You can't blame me for being cautious. I've never spoken to your leader in my life and last gathering... She was pretty blunt and cold."

"Like I said, she's been that way since Galetooth left. I doubt it's actual malice towards your clan or Talonstar," Lightpaw repeated.

"Who is this Galetooth tom anyway? Her mate? You did mention she loved him," Oatpaw quizzed.

Lightpaw shook her head. "They weren't mates that I knew of but Galetooth was a secretive one."

"You two enjoying your gossip?"

The low voice startled them both and they turned to acknowledge the silver and white ValeClanner. His face was stern and glare unmoved as it locked onto Oatpaw in almost a challenging manner. Oatpaw felt the fur along his spine begin to spike a little, but he maintained his composure.

"I was just asking Oatpaw how his training has been, Mistyecho, that's all," Lightpaw mewed in reply, scoffing under her breath for a moment at her clanmate's interruption.

Mistyecho huffed and over his shoulder Oatpaw spotted Willowmist observing them from the corners of her vision. She peered away and slipped back into her conversation with Hollynose when Oatpaw

glanced her way. Had she been eavesdropping? Oatpaw hoped to the stars not. He was nosey enough to want to learn what Rainstar wanted from him without his clanmates knowing. If Willowmist told Talonstar, he'd have Rainstar's ears for sure.

"It's about time we head back to the others," Mistyecho ordered, turning around to face Hollynose instead. "I want to make sure Batsight has eaten and her kits are well."

Hollynose appeared as if she had something more cruel to snap at the tom but instead spoke in a flat tone. "I'm sure your sister is well attended to by Haresnap." Mistyecho looked on in disapproval but Hollynose ignored him and bowed her head to the CoppiceClan patrol. "May your clan hunt plenty this leafbare. Stay warm!"

"All the same to yours," Willowmist purred.

"I'll be sure to tell Rainstar to expect you tonight. Take care, Oatpaw," Lightpaw whispered with a departing grin.

Oatpaw mumbled a goodbye to his friend with a blinking stare after her and the patrol. He was still bewildered by Rainstar's sudden need to talk to him of all cats in the Clans, but his paws also buzzed with a strange excitement.

"You and your friend don't whisper as quietly as you should."

Oatpaw froze at Willowmist's words as she approached him, huddling close to her apprentice and speaking in a hushed, serious tone. "I don't know what their leader wants from you but I will be coming with you tonight."

"I don't think Rainstar would hurt me," Oatpaw countered with a sideways look at his mentor as she turned around to stand in the same direction now. "I don't need your he-"

"It's either I tag along just in case or I tell Talonstar about this," Willowmist cut off with a simple sternness. "Which do you prefer?"

Oatpaw grumbled and glanced away from his mentor's stare. "You tagging along," he replied with a long exhale.

Willowmist hummed in approval before turning back to acknowledge Hawkstorm waiting patiently for her lead. Oatpaw grumbled after his mentor. Deep down he appreciated her concern, but he also didn't think he needed it. He *knew* Rainstar must've found out about the prophecy and just wanted information on it. He doubted the ValeClan leader would spin treachery through their meeting - unless her sudden coldness towards Talonstar had deeper implications.

Hawkstorm slowed her pace to fall into step beside Oatpaw as Willowmist led them back to where they had originally separated from Flickerwing and Webtail. "Willowmist giving you a headache?" She asked with an airy chuckle.

Oatpaw's gaze stuck to his mentor and he slowly shook his head. "No. She's just protective, that's all."

"You can't blame her. She's kind to the ValeClanners, but she's careful on our connections with them since Cottonleap," Hawkstorm advised in a whisper.

Oatpaw slowed so they were further behind Willowmist, ensuring his mentor's apparently heightened hearing wouldn't catch on to his whispering now. He had heard the name Cottonleap slip from Willowmist only once before, but never afterwards. He glanced sideways at Hawkstorm in obvious curiosity, and the she-cat took note of it instantly as she went on.

"She doesn't explain it to any cat, but we all know," Hawkstorm began with a frown. "When she was younger, they said she was always seeing him at gatherings. He was a ValeClan tom but that didn't stop them from being close. Then no cat knows how it happened and when Willowmist was pregnant, but one day Violetstar showed up and returned Stormykit to CoppiceClan insisting Willowmist keep him. She had given him up to ValeClan when she had him but supposedly Cottonleap was cruel to him. He was nothing but a foxheart of a father so Violetstar returned Stormykit in a heartbeat back to Willowmist. Goldenstar was hesitant having learned about the between clans relationship, but we allowed Stormykit and Willowmist to stay within our ranks." Hawkstorm's eyes narrowed. "When news broke out about

Cottonleap's death during that one, terrible leafbare, it was the only death most of us didn't wince at, especially her and her son."

Oatpaw was stunned by the information. He never took Willowmist as a cat to fall in love outside their borders. He knew it was shunned and against the code, though that didn't seem to stunt any cats respect for the older warrior.

He opened his mouth for further questioning but was cut off by a blur of orange fur pouncing out of the undergrowth and tackling Hawkstorm. He tensed up for a moment but quickly relaxed as he recognized Flickerwing over top of the she-cat, the orange tom grinning down at his clearly agitated friend. Hawkstorm swatted a paw over the tom's ears and she pushed him off of her, turning to then acknowledge Webtail as his white fur slinked out from the brush.

"Teach your apprentice some manners," she joked with a huff, earning an eye roll from Flickerwing.

Webtail only chuckled and nudged Willowmist's shoulder with his nose. "How was Stone Pools? Any trouble?"

Willowmist's eyes caught Oatpaw's before she answered. He knew all too well what she wanted to say, but there was a shared acknowledgement between them that kept Willowmist's response brief.

"It was fine. No concerns."

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Later that night as the moon held steady in the sky, Willowmist had only made it easier for Oatpaw's departure from camp. She dismissed them both by making sure a few warriors believed her and Oatpaw were persistent on training for some night time hunts.

Many batted their eyes at Willowmist as if she were crazy for wanted to hunt on a leafbare night, but she wanted to ensure that if any cats woke to find their nests empty that it wouldn't cause a panicked stir. They managed to leave camp without waking any cat or making any clamor, though the instant chill of the night air made Oatpaw wish he was still bundled up in his nest.

He was grateful for Willowmist's company also as she strolled close to his side, her gray pelt shielding him from most of the cold breezes' torture. She stuck like frost to moss beside him and never lingered as they trekked to the Stone Pools. Their voyage was eerily silent, Oatpaw sneaking worried glances at his stone-faced mentor every few tail-flicks. He couldn't tell if she was angry with him or just worried about what Rainstar wanted from him, and either way he was concerned Willowmist would find a way to chase the ValeClan leader off.

Willowmist halted suddenly, Oatpaw freezing up beside her. "I'll stay back here. I'll be downwind and far enough away in the brush to where she cannot see me," Willowmist addressed in a mumble. "I'll sneak closer to hear better once you're ahead but you should go on without me."

He was shocked Willowmist didn't insist she come with but it was smarter of her to attune to Rainstar's wants for the ordeal to proceed. He dipped his head to his mentor and with a nervous inhale he strode forward towards the Stone Pools. The cold wind flit through his fur and made his teeth clench. He couldn't feel his hackles rise against breeze and his ears tucked against the back of his head. Now as he padded on to meet secretly with the opposite clan's leader in the first chill of leafbare, he *really* wished he was cozy in his nest instead.

Oatpaw weaseled through the undergrowth and slowly eased his way out towards the Stone Pools. He held in his breath as he spotted Rainstar's familiar, silver pelt ahead, the she-cat sitting with her tail folded around her form. He took every paw-step from there on out gradually and cautiously and Rainstar caught onto his nervousness in a heartbeat. The ValeClan leader granted a faint, welcoming smile as she lifted her tail to twitch it and beckon him forward.

"You're Oatpaw, correct?" She asked in a soft, mellow voice.

He stopped right before the stones, his paws teetering on the edge before a little stream in front of him. "Yes. I am."

"I hear that you're Talonstar's son," Rainstar spoke again quickly, a bitter twitch to her face at the mention of his father. "There's not much resemblance there."

Rude, Oatpaw thought, narrowing his eyes back at the leader. "If this is about my father, why involve me? I'm just an apprentice," Oatpaw snapped, though he winced at his own approach towards the other cat - a leader at that. "I just... I don't like that I was randomly asked to come here *alone.*"

"I don't blame you for being suspicious," Rainstar admitted, standing as she glanced around at their surroundings. "But I *worry* for you and your sister. There is things you are unaware of that I believe pose harm not only to your kin, but to your clan as well."

Oatpaw took a step back at her words, dumbfounded. "What is there to worry about? You-" His words were caught in his throat. He was going to question if her worry was due to the prophecy, but he knew ValeClan shouldn't have known a rat's tail about any of that. It made him sink back to Mousepaw's words about the end of the vision and he winced before continuing. "What is your problem with my father?" He instead asked, swallowing back a snappy tone to lace it with.

"Do you know of a cat named Briarblossom?" Rainstar queried.

"She was my mother's sister," Oatpaw retorted, though his eyes were narrowed and he was on edge. He didn't know where the ValeClan leader was going with this *at all.* "She ran away from the clans before my sister and I were born."

Rainstar appeared ruffled by his answer. "Is that what Talonstar told you?"

Oatpaw was unnerved by the leader's constant need to spit out her father's name as if it was the first frost of leafbare sitting bitterly on

the tip of her tongue. He stared back at the leader challengingly. "That's what *every cat* tells me."

The silver she-cat's muzzle was drawn with a deep frown. She took a few paw-steps towards Oatpaw and this time the tom didn't flinch back. Despite his caught offense by her questioning, he was tied back into the ordeal by the distressed twist to her face as she spoke. Oatpaw didn't know what Rainstar had to spew about Briarblossom and Talonstar but maybe the leader's concerns were worth listening to whether they had to tie in with the prophecy or something entirely different. He found himself leaning forward as she parted her jaws to speak again, their eyes meeting and Oatpaw relaxing for a moment to confide in the leader.

"Talonstar isn't-"

"I don't know why you proceed to have such a problem with *our* leader, but you will not taint our apprentices with your hatred!"

Willowmist's outburst made Oatpaw whirl around in an instant. The gray she-cat had pounced out of the undergrowth, lips drawn back in a defensive snarl and a glare burning into Rainstar's pelt. She shook a few loose twigs out of her bushed fur and leaped forward to stand beside Oatpaw, ushering him behind her with her tail. He was reluctant to follow for a moment as he was desperate to hear what Rainstar had to say but Willowmist shot him a demanding look that made him stumble back anyway.

"Willowmist." Rainstar was alarmed by her presence as she stepped back simultaneously. She didn't let the warrior's arrival dishevel her concern though. "I take it Oatpaw brought you as company just in case? There's nothing to worry about, I promise. I just want-"

"I don't care what you want or need! You will leave this instant or I will tell Talonstar of this undisclosed meeting as soon as I return to camp," Willowmist snapped.

Rainstar's ears drew back and Oatpaw felt numb. He knew Willowmist was just trying to protect and serve their leader and clan, but something didn't feel right about her defending his father's name in that moment. Whatever Rainstar had to say was important

and Oatpaw could tell she had held onto it for moons.

"Maybe we should let her finish," Oatpaw advised his mentor in a low, timid voice.

Willowmist glanced back with almost an assentive look, but then she turned back to Rainstar and shook her head. "I am not willing to listen and my apprentice won't be either. If you have important news to share, you'll share it in a way that isn't so private and skeptical. Got it?"

His mentor speaking to the ValeClan leader as if she were one herself was jarring, but it didn't seem to phase Rainstar as much as it did him. The silver tabby was astonished but quiet, tail lashing to and fro behind her. Oatpaw could tell she wanted to argue Willowmist's stance but she was also reluctant to spike further conflict out of it.

"I will take your advice, Willowmist. I apologize, sincerely," she sighed and slowly turned around, bowing her head respectfully to the CoppiceClan she-cat.

As Rainstar disappeared back into her territory, Oatpaw felt his heart sink. Already had he learned the truth of he and his sister's fatal end to their destiny and now there seemed to be some other secret tied to the ValeClan leader's tongue. If her secret had some way of changing their fates or at least protecting his sister, he *needed* to know. He stared after her long-gone form with a desperate, longing gaze to which Willowmist noticed in a heartbeat.

"I wouldn't trust any cat outside our ranks, Oatpaw. Leader or not, Rainstar is still young and unsure. You could argue your father is all the same but..." Willowmist's eyes narrowed. "One of them is obviously more tainted than the other."

Oatpaw clenched his teeth. For once, he found himself unable to agree to what he should've been.

"Let's head back. I won't bring any of this up to Talonstar but if I hear of anymore secret meetings, I'll be sure to," Willowmist exhaled, granting Oatpaw an uplifting smile and nudging him.

He grinned back. He appreciated his mentor's protectiveness but still as they turned back towards camp did he find his gaze linger behind him again. Perhaps the moor held secrets worth knowing that the forest only carried hushed whispers of.